

## The Cotton Spinner

**WEIGH:** Four calico bags bulging with cotton are unloaded from the car into the mill's *devil hole*, where technicians haul them onto the steel-bed of a scale. They constantly refer to my 'small amount' of cotton. After weighing, the bundles are carried to the *blowing room*. Markings on the discarded inner coverings read — Balaka, Malawi; where the cotton was ginned, Blantyre, Malawi; where it was loaded, and Helmsdale, Scotland; its' destination.

*Wounds gouged from mountainsides in search of the cave's entrance. Fumes of smelted oar clog the already thick air on approach. No mercy, a mother's blood once spilled cannot be gathered up again. Enveloped in an undulating heat. A tightening passageway of blue and purple cobwebs, stitched together with the tangled hair of beldams withered and decayed. Dipping down into velvet blackness, enveloped by a downy sea, flames reduced to squealing piles of snow-white ash.*

**LOFT:** When the cast-iron *hopper-opener* is switched on, its rumbling joins the background din. Two men stand on either side and feed cotton into its' black, bucket-mouth. I peer over the edge and see this *lofted* up by a row of spikes, before being sucked into tubes above. The overhead mechanisms need constantly prodded and unblocked. The end of this process delights us; greatly increased in volume, cotton fibres drift down into over-flowing bins.

*The horizon grows sickly, leaden with the lust of becoming. A great and evil rhinoceros grinds and clangs inside the blinding clatters of a million supernovas. Grassy daggers cling desperately to the shields of earth that crumble and fragment, joining the chorus of searing noise as they fall into pits of oozing friction. While far above a young girl gathers flying petals in the folds of her dress. She cries with joy as her fingers caress the supple fuzz, content with not knowing. All that lasts is change.*



**SCUTCH:** The technicians are nervy about the temperamental scutching machine; to keep it operational, they must make constant running repairs. Once piled onto a slow-moving belt of wooden slats, the cotton disappears. It emerges loosely felted, onto the final belt, to be rolled into a *lap*. Spilled cotton is continuously retrieved and brushed from the floor. After four hours, four perfect laps are weighed and I'm told that less than a pound of fibre has been lost from the starting weight.

*The wheeled arachnid rolls and races in the sand, thousands move in unison to form the knots and nets of precious sraf. She tends to her cosmic garden of neat hedgerows and gathers lives in jugs from the crimson river. Infinite worlds encased in pebbles underfoot. The iron door looms, adorned with strange flags and unfamiliar carvings. Countless stories carried carelessly in the hands of an alien 'other' across the cavernous threshold.*

**CARD:** We go up in the lift to the spinning floor. Inside the wooden covers of the carding machines, rotating drums comb and tease the cotton laps into airy fibre folds, fed into a spinning, vertical drum. A continuous rope of *sliver* forms, peaking over the top of the drum before a plate compresses it down. I decant the first coils into three hessian sacks I've brought from home; the remaining cotton will fill about seventy-seven more bags.

*A conveyer belt of rotating needles, raking at the taut surface. Horror and beauty in rare combination. King of the cloud and lord of the winds in turn denied her and the third bell began to toll. A single crystalline tear, fat and bulbous with a thousand unspoken words twists and turns. A sea of rusted nails hammered by a father's hands into the wooden ceiling of her own tiny home, doomed to float for eternity on rolling wisps of asp.*



**SPIN:** To turn the sliver into thread I have a book-Charkha spinning wheel, imported from India. I practice determinedly for days in front of YouTube videos; watching American ladies spin on their sofas and Indian men sit on the floor, keeping the Charka steady with a crossed leg. After countless adjustments I learn to *draft* an arms-length of soft fibre from the sliver in my left hand, turn the big wheel clockwise to add twist, then backwards to wind my thread down the spindle-spike.

*Piles of tangled limbs undulating as one. Branches and ligaments all inside out, looped around the spinning engine. A woven border of olive branches and in one corner, a pile of deer bones on the mossy ground. Varnished and glistening they wait patiently to be judged as instruments of pleasure or pain. A laughing hyena wrapped in a tight cocoon of dry, coarse grasses, rolled towards the road waiting to be burned alive. The elephant returns with matches. She ought not blame her daughter.*

**SKEIN:** I read Gandhi's design brief for the Charka, which clearly states; *a lady shall be able to work with it for eight hours...without great effort put in.* Still, I need to stop every ten minutes to stretch. When thread needs wound from a full spindle, I assemble the *yarn-winder* pieces from the charka box and fit it onto the top of the smaller wheel. Yarn is wound in loops around the four spokes, securely tied together, slipped loose and twisted into a *skein*, ready for weaving.

*Once it was finished, she slammed the boxwood shuttle down onto the child's head. One, two, three times it was raised and brought down again. Pounding and crushing until flesh and bone could be shaped into neat cylinders and laid carefully in spirals across the ground. A tiny baby wrapped in a smooth white cloth, gurgling into nothingness. A silent screaming song of silver and red all neatly packed, ready to be subsumed into the ignorance of time in some faraway place.*