

## The Flax Grower

**DIG:** It starts with one line of string laid out in my front garden, in early spring. Further lines radiate from the centre point to make six equal segments. Cutting down with the spade, I shuffle around clockwise, joining the outer point of each string to make one continuous, circular brown slit in the grass. And then I dig.

*The warmth of genesis. Inception radiates. An organic rhythm thumps beneath the surface. Pale flesh flushes with crimson. Saturation bursts. Open terra, seductive, bewitching. Calloused hands reinforce one another, rough cloth absorbs beads of salt. Straining together, breathing as one. Relief echoes. Distance evaporates, linearity dissolves. Faces turn, lips sculpt words in the frosty air. Primogenitor, ancestor, mother.*

**RAKE:** The small amount of topsoil underneath the turf is poor because the garden is still really part of the rocky beach across the road. I wheelbarrow in tonne-bag fulls of topsoil and rake it together with compost, until I think I have a seed-bed of *fine tilth*.

*A world comes into focus. Grey sky, a biting wind, the rich smell of petrichor. Intimacy creeps, the figures sharpen. A smooth wooden handle charged with organic current. Imbued with purpose. Lines in the earth form a pathway into the past.*

**SOW:** Mother's Day, 31st March 2019 — one daughter weighs out enough of the silky brown seeds to make a dense planting of two thousand plants per square meter. The family line up and I make us rehearse until we can sow our allocated section of seeds in a smooth, circular choreography.

*Eyes open to a deluge of dirt. The earth's mouth gulps greedily. Submerged, scuppered, entombed, enshrouded. For ten days there will be silence. Long-awaited verdure slithers beneath the surface, waiting patiently to be born again. High above the figures flicker, bent and silent. Faces blurred, they move in patterns. Rise, step, crouch. Rise, step, crouch. A facsimile of generations long past.*

**WATER:** Flax seedlings are *frost tolerant* and they begin to emerge on April 16th after sleet and snow. I pull one up; the strong branching root makes up two-thirds of the plant. Next day the hottest recorded spell of April weather begins. I hadn't anticipated this, but I water every second day, using twenty-four watering cans each time.

*A new sound, a light in the dark. Transparent, tasteless, odourless, colourless. No, not colourless. Particles swirl to make green. Droplets of memory, a hand pulls back a curtain. Blurred spectres flicker across the ether. A dry globe in reverse. Empty chasms fill with sustenance. Concrete cracks, a force pushes back against gravity. The ignition of the inevitable.*

**WEED:** There are many vigorous weeds, most of which are new in my garden so probably arrived in the topsoil. I look them up as I go and nearly all have associations with traditional medicine — *Plantain; leaves in poultice used for sores, blisters, swellings and insect stings*. The physiotherapist I see for my shoulder says she recommends all her middle-aged female patients take two table-spoons of ground flax seeds a day to replace oestrogen's anti-inflammatory properties.

*Separation. Everything was once not whole. Remove the bad, preserve the good. A strange pounding from within. Dormant sensations return to the surface. Pummel. Pound. Small, invaluable. Can't let it get away. A flash. The last vestiges of flora. The opposite of alive pulses. A bitter taste on the tongue. Stomach churns. To protect is to destroy.*

**PULL:** In late June the first fragile blue flowers open, each lasts a day before fading to form a seed-head. On a sunny morning, a hundred and sixteen days after sowing, I pull the flax. Starting from the outside of the circle, I gather a small bunch with my right hand and pull up with my left, repeating until I can't comfortably hold anymore. At the end of the day the circle is edged by sixty bundles of flax, these are stored to dry the colour of straw. On a roasting September afternoon, my eldest daughter visits; wearing a shocking pink silk skirt she helps remove the dry seedheads, using a rolling pin to crush and a pillow case to catch.

*Hands feel for invisible intricacies. Unknown textures and remote familiarities, a distant memory of movement. Smooth and rough. Eyes turn towards the ground, skin puckers with forgotten feeling. Palms crack. What was once soft and pure transforms. Time moves backwards. Now worn, adept. Fingers grasp at unseen shapes, feet trace a circular pattern. Alive used to have an opposite, what was it?*