

The Flax Spinner

BREAK: The flax is dried again after lying on the grass, rotting to muted greys and browns in the October dew. The brittle stalks break under any kind of pressure and its thrilling to see fibres inside. Crunching and snapping, the stems are fed from flower to root end into the blade of a borrowed *flax-break*. When the bunch is pulled out it's no longer straight but a rippling horse tail of rough fibres, with bits of straw attached.

The almighty valves of the accordion bellow out glistening particles into the frosty air. Its heavy pendulums swing back and forth, forging a quiet threshold. A transitory meeting place. Little Oom and the basket of burning jelly stumble in the night. A blue pebble in a mouse's skull. All things must die. I am all things. Therefore, I must die.

SCUTCH: The *scutching board* is a plank of smooth pine, cut higher on one side and inserted into stable wooden feet. My mother threatened me with a good scutching if I didn't behave, I remember this as I hook the bunch around the board's raised shoulder and strike rhythmically with a wooden sword, shaking and turning until there are no bits of straw left. I work with many different helpers, it is dusty, noisy work and before it occurs to wear masks, makes our nostrils black and eyes red.

The vulgar tongue snakes across the wooden plank. A rough cloth muffles the rhythmic throb. Prickling vibrations claw at the edges. Electric pulses startle in a hollow wooden cavity, cardboard coral that can't get wet. The cat o' nine tails rips apart skeletal skin, discarded flesh gulped hungrily by writhing little makers. Ornamental strands bind brittle calves until only a single chord remains. A seeded organism held together by the promise of futurity.

HECKLE: Everyone wants a turn at *heckling*; we swing the flax-tail from behind our backs, down through three descending sizes of combs in turn. Nervous of the precious fibres caught on the teeth, I instruct to think of a child's head and comb from the ends towards the middle, moving back to the coarsest comb if there's a knot. Never tug. The long, *line flax* is tied in bunches and hung against the wall to be admired, the range of grey, white and yellowish tones is incredible.

Sharp blades of rusting grass burst upwards from a dry and desolate savannah. Sparks crackle across rake marks in the torrid air like rigid ripples of luminous algae, blooming through the black swell. An ancient Emperor sits cross-legged on a golden throne and slides a tile of bone, dotted with red and black, across the backs of her people. The mah-jong flowers form neat rows of carved stems, pounded into an infinite abyss by a porcelain hammer. Glimpses of pearl.

DRESS: Organising the combed fibres to *dress the distaff* for spinning is intense and makes me hold my breath in concentration. I start by tying a tail of flax around my waist. While sitting, this is fanned out, letting each individual fibre overlap it's neighbour to gradually form a calf-length, filament skirt. After untying, I kneel to roll the flax fan around the cone distaff and attach it in the distinctive criss-cross of a medieval princess hat.

Axis mundi. Bright ribbons flash around the maypole that stretches between worlds. The belt that was never Orion's strikes a pale plane of fibrous cloud. The quiet whisps shatter the hand that strikes. Lingering tendrils seep through muddy rifts. Tributaries merge at the helter-skelter of this mortal coil. Peeling knuckles tighten on the coarse mat which hurtles toward unmaking.

SPIN: I have a simple *drop spindle*, bought after a short course and practice sporadically. It only starts to come naturally when I trust the bite of twisted fibres between my finger and thumb, judging how long to hold back before releasing the twist up into the untwisted fibres on the distaff. Switching to the spinning wheel means a new synchronising of hands, and feet with water or saliva to dampen the spun thread. But the fingertip memory of twist is the same and with many good, patient teachers and co-spinsters, I learn.

A small stick jams the wheel, rekindles the flame. The blinding horizon fades. The cycle begins again. Sandpaper tongues wet a new wick and the strained coil of the contortionist unfurls. Soon to be rewound again by the pristine feet of dancers from a distant land. Fortuna's tentacles spread in ringlets across time. Unseen navigators of a plaited neural pathway. Synapses cannot fire alone.

SKEIN: From now on, it's necessary to keep the spun yarn neatly organised for efficient weaving. I'm keen to wind it in loops around my forearm and foot, but this is not consistent enough and instead it needs wound on a *niddy-noddy*. I resent this little shaft of turned wood and the YouTubers who birl it like majorettes while moving the thread up and down in continuous N formation. I love the resulting skein though. By holding each end of the loop, twisting then releasing, it coils back on itself making a tight double-helix of yarn.

A waxing crescent, shoulders bent inwards, contracting, shrinking. Threads tug at wrists, a dancing marionette. One-two-three-four, un-deux-trois-quatre, eins-zwei-drei-vier. Chained feet shuffle forward, rhythmic steps and an acapella note. Jagged lines in the dust. Twisted echoes squeeze ligneous ribs. Tighter and tighter. Ensnared in a net of constellations, wrenched and heaved towards the surface.