

The Fields

by William Owen

Swat at those screeching children with tufts of harp-grass. Flail, mad eyed and sad sighed with all gleaming hope gone out of the daylight. Swat and screech swat and screech. We continue until their thick bark-like hides are smooth and polished. We sand them with coarse fibers. We make them regular. Their voices drive us onward to frenzy as the beating of a slave-drum calling out the rhythms of our hands. Screech and swat screech and swat. Laboring in their piercing insanity, the driving oars of our progress sanding down their rough edges with our whipping hands. Their violence cannot be hugged away even if their voices didn't simmer draughts of berserk fervor directly into our minds. Draughts we need to maintain our brutality.

As they screech under our onslaught the children lope about in the field digging holes, gathering up small mouthfuls of grit and stone before scrambling on. Eviscerated worms and black bits overturned beneath the earth and hauled up by shoveling hands. Scramble and scrounge scramble and scrounge. They chew this cud into a viscous mass, sucking out whatever nutrients drive their awful growth. A primordial soup slipping down the back of their gape. That unction pools in their hollow caverns, fosters the calcitinous growth of their barbed plates. It fuels the craze contained within their voice. If they aren't ground down every day they just impale one another rolling around in their sleep in the pens at night. Scrounge and scramble scrounge and scramble.

The waste they spit up onto the ground in pools of molten metal sings the grasses. Smoke rises in thin streams behind us. Small fires light and are swatted down. The transmorphic salvia seeps into the roots around the field, hardening the cell walls of the plants into the wire we cut to swat them with. Singe and spit singe and spit. We clear the alchemically wiry growth each morning before bringing the children into the field. Gomers follow behind us. Wax coated cotton stuffed in their ears keep from them the maddening cries that drive

us into our fury, collecting the gold nuggets once they have cooled, picking them and wiping them free of earth. Piling them into buckets hauled behind our terrifying enterprise in carts traversing a pox-marked smoldering mess of a landscape. Singe and spit. They watch the oldest ones, waiting for a thin band of blood to rise after a brush from our hands, noting the softening, adolescent hide.

At night we sit waiting for the light to fail. We rub absent-minded at the surface of our arms where the barbs used to grow while we watch the drivers loading up the gold to take into town. Our minds awake and our own once again, we resist the exhaustion of our frantically tired bodies to silently revel in the freedom of our thoughts. We to a man cannot help but fall asleep each night damned with the chant in our head:

Swat and screech
screech and swat
scramble and scrounge
scrounge and scramble
singe and spit
spit and singe
bring in the load
gather the gold.

