

The land again

It can never be only about the land.
It carries everything.

If it's about this land
(and it is – it must be – we're here)
then it's also about violence.

There's a weight to these places
even after the names have been changed.

When they taught us about colonisation,
it was about the length of the sea voyage
and the hard labour of cutting away bush.

They didn't talk about stolen land
or broken agreements
or the systematic negation
of language and culture
and whānau and whakapapa.
About so many types of brutality.

The harsh conditions aboard ship
and on new shores were part
of a narrative built up apace with
the weatherboard houses and English gardens.
A certain gauge of wire and way of speaking
and the number of sheep to every person.
Tools to hammer a new name
into the soil of Aotearoa like fence posts.
New Zealand loves to wear the skin of the underdog.

The labour (or the land again)

If it is woven, it is also about work.
Not just the labour of its own making
but other labour too.

Steam-power and assembly lines.
The suppression of Luddites.
The boom and bust of factories
and the movement of jobs off-shore.

Textiles hold that tension between the soft human body
and the systems of markets and industry.

There's a humanity to fabric, that urge
to put it between ourselves and the world.
To drape, to clothe, to swaddle.

But trade and currency are part of the tapestry,
at hand in each stage of the making.
Demand for the cloth means more of the fleece.

And then it's about the land again.
The theory that vikings needed to conquer
more fields to raise more sheep to outfit more ships.

About the destruction of the commons
and the eviction of farmers from small holdings
to make way for more intensive farms.

The newly landless driven into cities to work
as "unskilled labour" at automated looms,
while the commons made way for more sheep,
more wool to feed the factories.

The labour and the land (again)

Country and city pull at each other.
Production and consumption.
Land and opportunity.

Working inside,
the sunlight is unrelated.
Nice or not enough,
but the days are the same.

Working outside means
working with the weather.
With the daylight or lack of it.

Working with the earth is constant.
Fixing fences and gear.

Shearing and lambing
docking and dipping
grazing and husbandry.

Ploughing, harrowing and sowing
sweetening and reaping.
Or leaving fallow.

The jobs change with the seasons
and sleep can be deep and easy
but there is no pause.

Only the roots of the gorse
growing deeper
only the threat of the frost.

The labour again

There's a lot we can do without.

But that's where the money is made.

Marketing and hedge fund management.

No one is getting rich caring
or cleaning, teaching or mending.

Wool was once called 'white gold',

now milk holds that title

and it costs more to shear a sheep
than it does to buy the fleece.

Sheep farms switch to dairy exports
or subdivisions.

The free market isn't interested.

It loves factory farming, fast fashion
and sweatshops.

The world fills up

with things that won't degrade.

More and more of our stories look
to after the apocalypse and wonder
what will we keep.

Lasting

Fabric is often missing from the deep past.

Stone age, bronze age, iron age.

The thread degrades so that discovering
early string requires powerful microscopes
and radiocarbon dating.

The needle and spindle outlast the thread.

It's the same looking forward.

Sci-fi is disinterested in soft furnishings.

All chrome surfaces and lycra bodysuits.

In fairness, you need a planet to raise sheep.

Ish Doney

The land

It is always also about the land.

Of course it is.

Everything comes from there.

It's there in the piece work of fields,
viewed from the sky.

But even if the weave had been
another pattern entirely,
it would have been there in the wool.
Spun from the long white fleece of sheep
carefully husbanded for hundreds of years.
Sheep bred again for this land.

And even if the yarn had been cotton,
the sheep would be there in the pattern,
in that division of fences.

Before the land was a thing
that could be owned and
fences were used to stake that claim,
they guarded livestock
from predators or wandering.

There's a trick of pretending
that we're not also nature.
Separating self from the dense weave
of ecosystems. But we live here too.
We're also about the land.