

Mower and Monk: Cultivating Patience In The Field

by Bernard Soubry

I'm squatting by the beet bed, pulling weeds in the rain, naming as I go. Jen is beside me, picking with both hands, pointing them out to me. *That's borage, that's dock*, she says. *That's ragweed, that's ground ivy*. I don't know how she knows all their names. I can't imagine having that kind of memory—it's like speaking another language.

That's couchgrass, that's vetch, I follow, pulling them up and dropping them into the path, leaving the rows of red-veined greens a little neater than they were. *That's right*, she says. We smile. Sometimes, speaking the names aloud with Jen or David as my guide, I feel like a four-year-old sounding out the words in a picture book. I don't mind, though—I'm learning. I want to know all the names.

I know the names of what we're waiting for. The fields are almost full with them, transplanted and seeded, still small but determined: great rows of kale and chard, lettuce and mustard. Tomatoes climbing their trellises like mountaineers, eggplants and peppers on either side, basking in the warm, humid glow of the hoopouses. Kevin and I pull sandbags from huge swaths of row cover that ruffle in the wind like topsails, and grin: our head lettuces, planted two weeks before, have unfurled great curled palms of green and red, speckled and bright in the morning sunshine.

They're not ready for harvest yet, though—none of it is. A reminder of this year's winter. So June becomes waiting, re-planting, re-working our plans to fill the time we would have taken to harvest. We build beds, dig rows, make our hands busy while we wait for the long warmth. And, boots stuck in mud by the beets, we weed.

Cultivation, we call it: to take care. Of the soil, of our crops, of the plants that spring between them. To find some moment in that endless cycle of growth to step in and make changes—in this case, getting rid of those seeds not of our own planting, who had bad enough luck in placement and timing to be called weeds.

Diamond, collinear, straight, stirrup, loop: the hoes all line up like wild birds, sharp feathers flashing out. Some sweep under the leaves of arugula so square and thin and close that you hold your breath as you draw back the blade. Others cut swaths over the roots of tomatoes, brush back chickweed and dogsbane, so hungry that they never need be taken off the ground. I like the way my body feels when I use them: straight back, head down, hands light. Precision, not force. I feel like a cross between a mower and a monk, losing myself in the swift figure-eights of cultivation.

I learn their names by the tips of my fingers, the edge of the blade. Tough vetch hangs like a palm tree, unfurling thin leaves, spreading by root. Chickweed blooms in matted clumps and quiet rosettes. Pigweed is loud and tall, lamb's-quarters a tiny multitude. All of them shouting up at us from between lettuce and turnip, each in a different language.

June is timing and forethought, swift hands and scuffed knees. One sunny day, David kneels with us in the far field, brushes his hand between the leeks, turning up the little line of white chickweed stalks to bake them in the heat. He smiles. "We do this now," he says, "and we save hours, hours, hours of labour." So we spend the afternoon on all fours, brushing up soil and unwanted seeds—thinking of the September harvest that those leeks promise us.

Cultivation is a relationship: to have lived with a place long enough to know its stages of birth, and growth, and decay. Knowing soil types and moistures, knowing what crops are strong enough to resist flame weeding, which weeds are weak enough to fall under the slightest crumbling of the soil.

How many more days? We ask every morning, looking longingly at the beds. The seedlings have been bulging under their row cover, promising plenty. I sit in the quiet fields at dawn and ache for the bustle of market, for the smiles we'll bring with us to town along with our first yields. Soon, we tell customers, wishing we were there. Soon. All of us urging salad and radishes on, working from dawn til dinner for a crop of filled beds and calloused hands. We hope they understand.

June cultivates patience. It reminds us that farming, like all good relations, is rooted into work and gratitude, sweat and trust. We may be waiting, but no part of us is idle. There's no time to pine for what might be coming. So you work at the covenant you've made with the land, with your plants, and with those who will reap from it.

This is a time of promises, of tending hopes, of holding back desire until the moment is ripe to pluck. But you call out to the fields, and work within the silence. Hope the land keeps its word. You learn to cultivate patience—because, for all that it feels like forever, the days of plenty will be upon us soon. Harvest knives will be sharpened, worksongs will be sung. If we've timed it well, the land will answer us—and we'll look across the rows and see it, almost there. Summer, warm and weedy, ripening on the vine.