



COTTON BLUES

Cotton... That's not even a name.

Still, it is hers.

The Master chose it
to make fun of her stiff hair,
to laugh at her big eyes,
and especially at her skin,
a skin so dark it seems cut off
from the night.

How old is she?

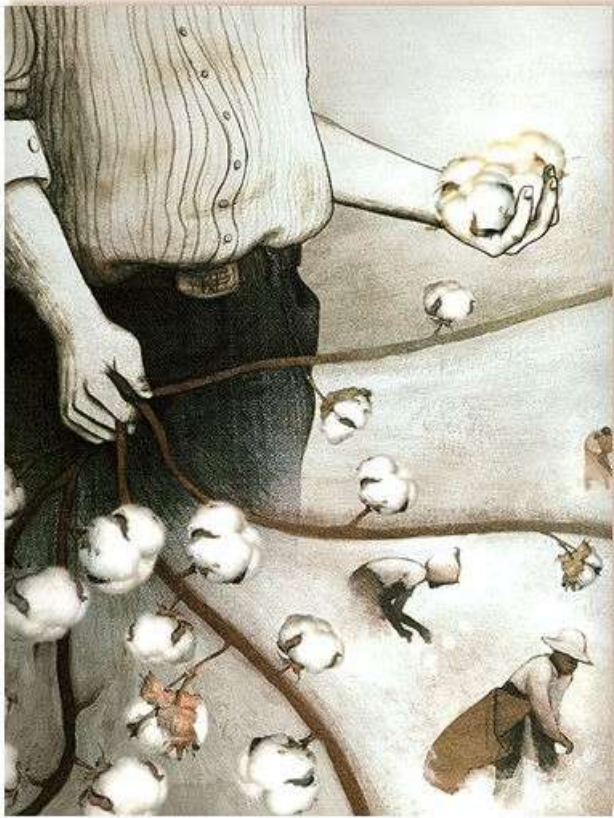
She ignores it.

Ten years, twelve perhaps...

Old enough to be sold,

old enough to work...





She is also called Cotton because it is the treasure of the plantation, its richness.

Because, without the cotton fields, the Master would be practically worthless.

She doesn't say anything. No sound has ever crossed her lips. One would think Cotton is dumb.

But she isn't. Who can guess if she even dreams?

She gets up in the morning, even before day itself.

First, she eats her flour mixed with water like the others.

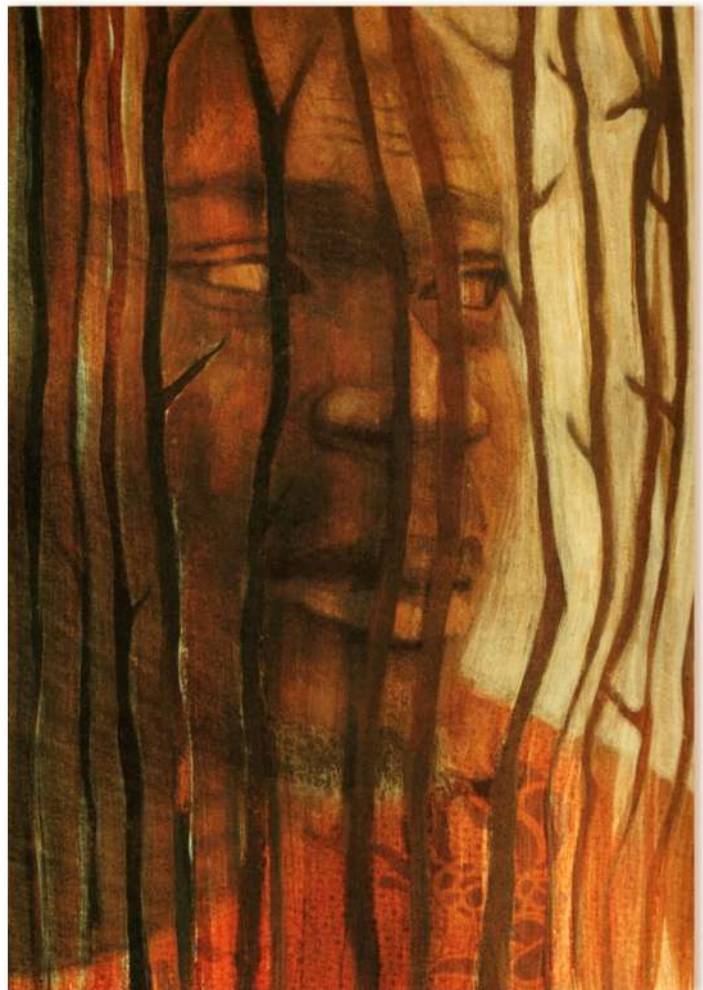
Then she goes her way, with a bag on her back, without looking around, wrapped up in herself.

She thinks of the old African...

Nobody notices Cotton.

Nobody speaks to her. It is as if she did not exist.

Only old Kunta knows her dream.



All day long, Cotton is surrounded by white.
The white of the whip,
the white of the flowers she picks,
the white of the scorching heat,
which tears her down and makes her head go round...



Cotton is quiet.

She works in silence.
The others sing songs
that make the stomach go round
and they cry with exhaustion.

Cotton doesn't sing.

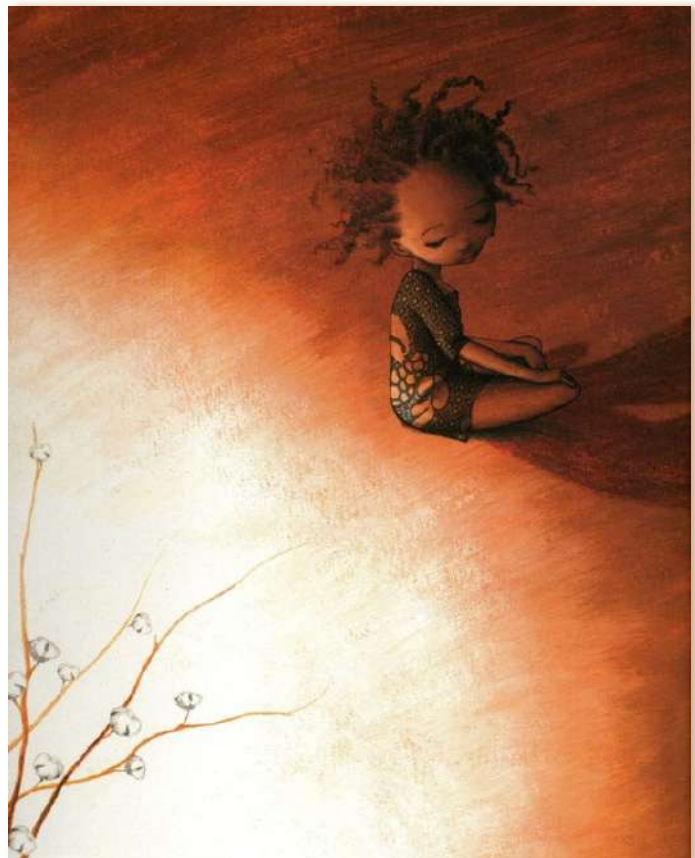
This music is not for her.
She only thinks of the night,
where she belongs.

As soon as it gets dark,
as soon as work is done,
as soon as the soup is
swallowed,
she goes and sits in the shadow,
away from the fires that draw
the other slaves.

And there...

Night obliterates all colours.
Everything becomes just like
her.
The Master's house, the sky,
the cotton itself
become soaked with darkness.

**There, at last,
her dream may begin.**



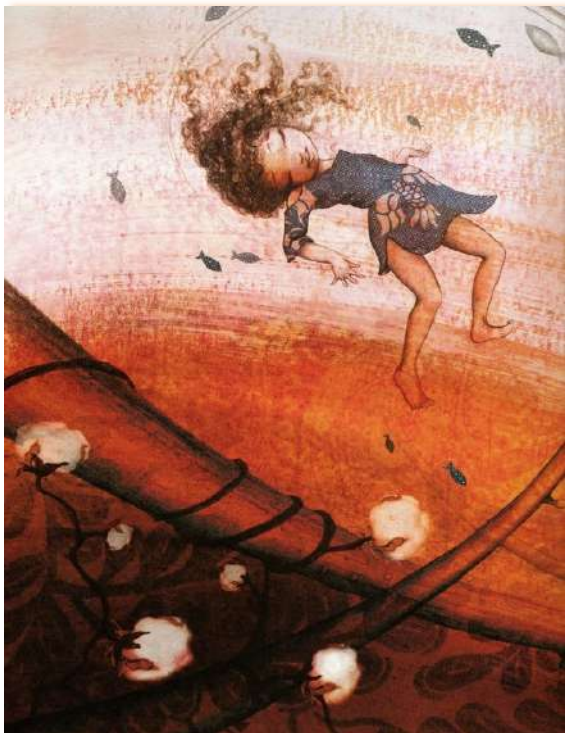


It's **Kunta** who told her about it.

Kunta, the old African from another plantation.

The one who came from farther than the ocean,
from beyond this world, where there are a lot of **mysteries**.

First, one has to close the eyes,
and let the warmth and the music
from the old country come to us.



In the darkness,
Cotton looks for the memory of Kunta
and tries to feel the wind running through
the savannah, and the smell of the
animals still running through her veins.

At last, she falls asleep,
although her eyes are open,
and the *koras*¹ refrain
is still in her mind...

*First, it is the wind
that runs through the fields,
then the animals' life fills her head.
Then comes the water,
always so rare and so precious.*

¹ Kora is a stringed instrument used extensively in West Africa

The Ocean...

And Cotton imagines she is bathing freely,
immerging herself in the ocean's big belly,
going deeper each time. Freedom!

Until she gasps for air,
until she sees, before her,
the magic wings of Mother Bird dancing.

At last, the giant bird takes her with it beyond the ocean.

The sea is beneath her,
the sky inside her head,
she feels the wind on the wings and
**sees the world
through the bird's eyes.**

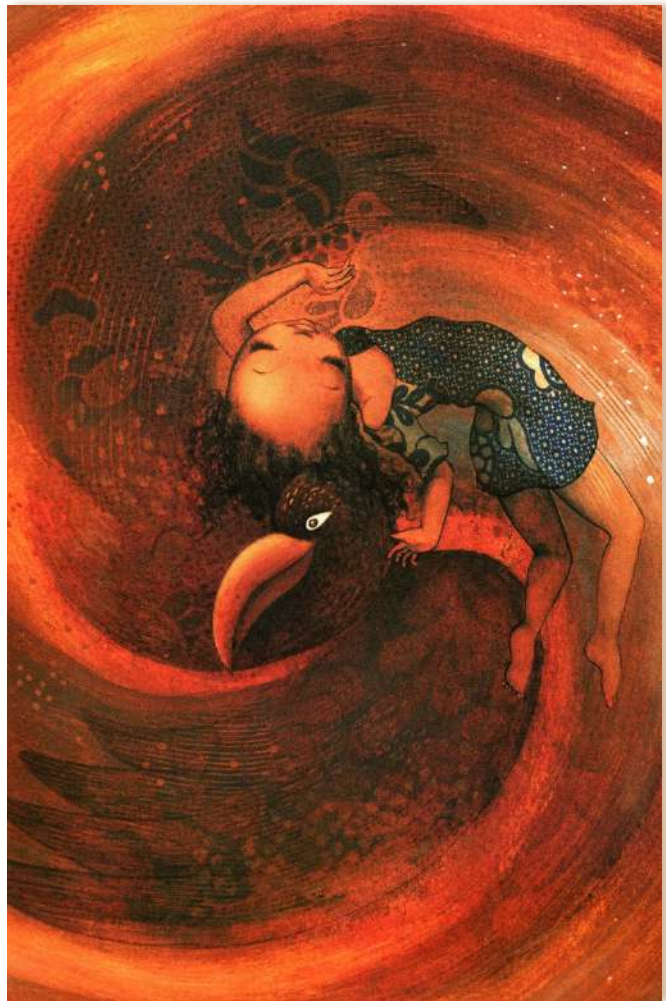
The bird is searching for
something while it flies over the
clouds...

Under its wings,
the earth is emerging in a variety
of quilted plains.

The fields are so white,
the ebony wood so dark,
the voices that reach Cotton
are so profound...

Secretly, they are guiding her
towards the Master's house.

She moves faster,
now that the end of her journey
approaches,
now that she hears the songs coming up
from amidst the flowers.





Down there, the harvest continues.

Nobody sees her.

She has become a strange bird that nobody will ever notice.

The bird stands back to back to the cabins and lands far from them, just in front of a girl who dreams with her eyes wide open...

Cotton wakes up alone in front of the fire embers. She knows that, one night, her dream will come true!

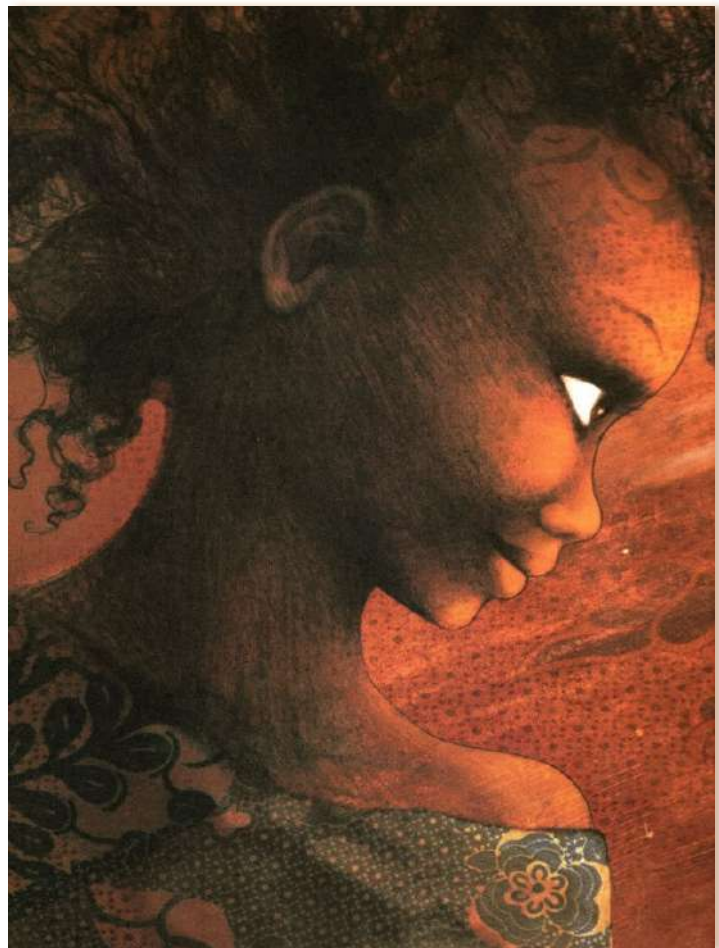
Time elapses.

Every day, Cotton harvests the white flowers.

Every night, she dreams in silence...

Then, one morning, she goes away.

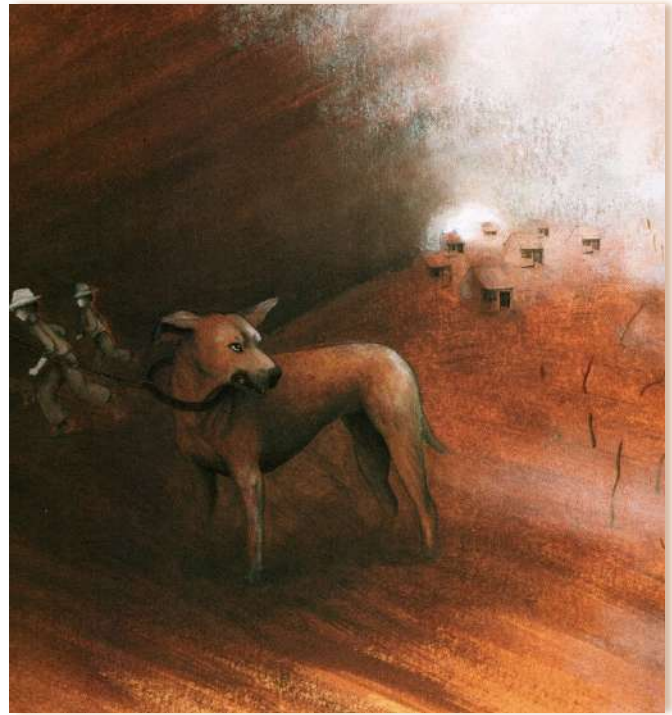
The slaves have cleaned the fields off their last feathers.



The Master has her looked for
everywhere in the plantation.

The slave hunters comb the region
for traces
and their dogs track the forests,
sniffing every bush.

**She was nowhere to be
found.**



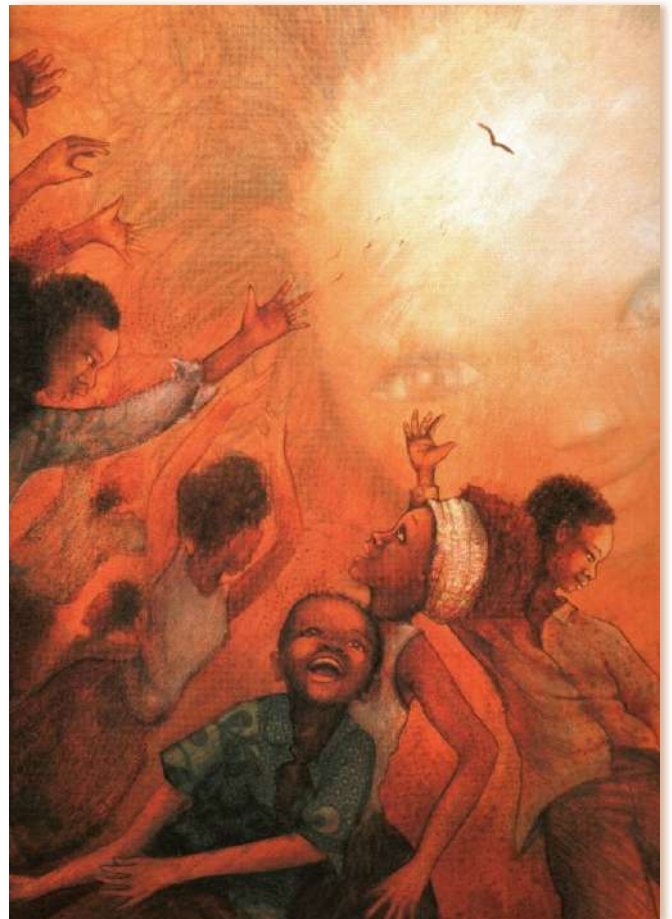
From that day onwards, slaves
have been singing her name.

They claim that Mother Bird
took her away
till the end of the Ocean.

They say
she can speak at last.

They say that she sings
to the rhythm of the *koras*
for all those on whom
Masters have imposed a name,
so they could laugh at their colour
and forbid their dreams...

*Cotton sings for those
who, one day,
will be awakened by the dream
and come to know Freedom as well...*



Régine Joséphine
Coton blues
Bilboquet-Valbert, 2010
(Translated and adapted)