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Open Fell Poetics

*A year in upland farming:
Investigating the Lake District as a Cultural Landscape
through practice based poetics.*

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Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements of the Degree
of MPhil by Research, Creative Writing

School of Interdisciplinary Studies,
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June 2017

Declaration

I declare that, except where explicit reference is made to the contribution of others, that this dissertation is the result of my own work and has not been submitted for any other degree at the University of Glasgow or any other institution.

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Abstract

This thesis is the result of two years spent alongside upland farmers in Cumbria and the development of a poetic practice arising from experimentation with form. It presents an almanac of the farming year together with a collection of poems inspired by my time with the farmers in the yards and on the fells.

My practical research has been rooted in farming tasks and conversations with present-day farmers, and in walks and conversations with others who manage the landscape in the Lake District National Park. This complements literary research that provides a contextual overview of history of literature relating to the Lake District; both are set within the context of the Lake District as a cultural landscape, as defined by UNESCO.

I examine the celebration of the region in popular writing, with an emphasis on poetry, and consider the under-acknowledgement of hill farming in its shaping of the landscape's appearance, and a tendency in literature to idealise this tough way of life. The English Lake District has, since the eighteenth century, been noted for its beauty, and attracts millions of tourists each year, many of whom are familiar with the work of celebrated writers and poets, perhaps most notably William Wordsworth, Samuel Coleridge and Alfred Wainwright. My thesis argues that existing popular literature often misrepresents upland farming, and I use creative writing to offer insights into farming practices that are often unseen, or overlooked, by the casual visitor to the Lake District as much as they are by literary commentators.

My practice is grounded in the act of making notes while in the field; my notes form the raw material for almanac entries and poems. Some poems have been developed, in form and presentation, following the traditions of Concrete Poetry and Open Field Poetics, and take these approaches further through the physical combination of poems and farming: I use traditional farming materials as canvases for words so that the poem's expression incorporates land, weather, livestock and people. The poems begin on farms, are developed on paper, and then pass through the hands of farmers and return to farms where they find their final expression. I have called this practice 'Open Fell Poetics'.

The use of prose as well as poetry is an independent presentation of two distinct forms. The prosaic form of the almanac allows for the integration of farmers' voices and reveals a collaboration between myself and them. The poetry highlights specific moments and allows for experimentation with form and space. The release of poems onto material that moves and changes allows the poems to embody the immutable topography of Cumbria and the unpredictability of upland farming: farmers must respond to the limitations of a fixed landscape while adapting to changing weather, policies and market forces. This challenges the view that any one piece of writing, or any single form of text, can definitively represent a culture as changeable and complex as upland hill farming, and invites a consideration from the reader or viewer of the role of literature in both defining and reflecting a cultural landscape.

Acknowledgements

My heartfelt thanks go to the farmers across Cumbria who have welcomed me onto their farms and into their kitchens; who have taken me out onto the fells to gather in sheep; have encouraged me to become involved in farming tasks throughout the year; and have patiently explained the details of farming and landscape to me. I am particularly grateful to Hannah Dickinson and Family at Brockstones Farm and to Anthony Hartley and his family at Turner Hall Farm for repeatedly welcoming me in and supporting the development of my poetic practice. I'd like to thank the committee of The Matterdale and St John's Sheep Show for granting me the great privilege of adding poetry to the champion rosettes, and Helen Rebanks for making a coffee cake that I could add poetry to.

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None of this would have been possible without the foundation of the work I carried out with Rob Fraser on *Land Keepers* (2012-2014), so I would like to thank Rob for encouragement and support not only during that project but also during my research for this MPhil, which has taken me a lot longer than I originally anticipated. Rob has been with me on a number of my days with farmers and I have appreciated his feedback and encouragement as I have developed the methodology for presenting poems in the landscape.

Throughout this MPhil, and indeed for many months before I started, I have been not only guided, but hugely inspired, by David Borthwick, whose supervision has allowed me to develop my practice, negotiate the demands and discover the rewards of academic discipline, and find a way to articulate and present my work cohesively. Huge thanks are due here: I wouldn't even have started if it hadn't been for Dr Borthwick's exuberant encouragement.

I would also like to thank Bethan Wood as my second supervisor, those who have provided feedback to me in academic reviews, and the department at the Solway Centre for Environment and Culture in Dumfries. My thanks also go to the University of Glasgow for awarding me the Cairncross McRae Scholarship, which enabled me to embark on this MPhil.

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Introduction

*Enough to hear
The names of the fells –
Herdus, Pillar, and Red Pike;
Fields and flowers –
Broad Close, Wham and Fittimer,
Gowan, ling, and cotton-grass;
Farms and their people –
How Hall, Hollins, and Howside,
Birkett, Rawling, Williamson;
Enough to know
I belonged to the place.*

'How Hall' Tom Rawling¹

I walked up a Lake District fell for the first time when I was fifteen, more than thirty years ago, under the guidance of my dad who had summited his first fell almost forty years previously. It was raining. I walked to a second summit the following day, when the cloud was so low I couldn't see the sky. I was hooked. I returned again and again, and eventually made the decision to move from Manchester and make the Lake District my home. With the fells on my doorstep, I was able to wander across them in all weathers, and my trips were extensive.

After a number of years, I assumed I knew the landscape well. I even wrote about walks in publications including *The Rough Guide to England*² and the *Westmorland Gazette*.³ In 2011, however, I discovered that my engagement with the land and my view of the Cumbrian fells had a significant blind spot. With my partner, Rob Fraser, I initiated a project about Cumbria's farmers which we called *Land Keepers*.⁴ The project ran from 2011-2014, and resulted in a book, a website and a touring exhibition of images and writing. I was introduced to a way of life and experiences of the landscape that had until then been invisible to me. As I began to learn more, I discovered that many other people - a fair representation of more than seventeen million annual visitors to the region⁵ and more than

¹ Tom Rawling, *Ghosts At My Back* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), p.39.

² Amanda Tomlin, ed., *The Rough Guide to England* (London: Rough Guides 1996).

³ 'Easy Miles' Column, *The Westmorland Gazette* 2003-2005.

⁴ <http://www.landkeepers.co.uk>.

⁵ Source: STEAM 2015 - Cumbria Tourism, <http://www.lakedistrict.gov.uk/learning/factsandfigures>. [accessed 10 December 2015]

forty-thousand who live in the National Park - had a partial view of this place: one that excludes the presence of a vibrant living culture and the many hill farmers whose lives are entwined with the land.

I was compelled, then, to look into the canon of literature written in and about Cumbria. I discovered that there was a dearth of texts that represented hill farming, or touched on it, in comparison to an extensive collection of tourist guides and books about walking; and that within this literature, there was a partial or skewed presentation of farming that did not fit with the experience I was having. This thesis has grown from my time walking and working alongside farmers and my enquiry into existing literature, ranging from Romantic lyrical writing to novels and Radical Landscape poetry. My own writing takes the form of a month-by-month almanac which records tasks that occur at particular times of year, together with poems that have arisen from the field notes I have made during these times.

My work has evolved during a period of three years and the writing takes a range of forms; this is a reflection of my inheritance of previous writers' styles, an organic response to my involvement with farming activities and landscapes, and the outcome of my practice, which takes as its raw material notes written outdoors while working or walking. These range from the poetic prose of the almanacs and poems that find neat containment on a page with a strict single margin, to the roaming of poems, word by word, over miles of fell, where movement and the physicality of land become part of the form. I call this 'Open Fell Poetics'.

The style of this collection emerges from a cross-breeding of form and content found in a poetic gene bank and it also experiments by forging new territory. The development of writing style has emerged from within the fold of farming - practical experience combining with linguistic experimentation to present a contemporary view of upland farming.

The inclusion of a range of forms within the regimented pattern of a twelve-month almanac offers a reflection of the ever-shifting balance between constancy and change in the Cumbrian fells, and the necessity for each individual farmer to adapt to changing circumstances. The form, while emergent from my own practice, also represents the co-existence of tradition and new views and practices, all of which arise from the close

relationship between land and people. The almanac and poetry collection, which I have called 'Bloodlines', offers a view of the diversity that is possible where tradition and innovation meet.

Tom Rawling's words, quoted on p. 1, frame the constancy of landscape through time in the names of families and places, and convey a sense of belonging woven into people and land. In Cumbria, as in every other part of the world, landscape is a place of inter-dependent relationships - between people, practices, weather, flora, fauna - and its stories are told in the physical appearance of the land as well as in people's words, shared orally and through literature. Rawling's work is an inspiration for me, and gives a representation of the relationship between farming and landscape based on first-hand experience; but it has not made it into the mainstream. I argue that it has been overpowered by the bigger and more persistent writings of the 'greats' like Wordsworth, whose influence on public perception of farming has been significant for more than one hundred and fifty years.

Entering into a Cultural Landscape

My geographical and topographical region of practice encompasses the high fells of the Lake District where farmers graze flocks on enclosed land, known as inbye and intakes, and on common land. My enquiry begins with a curiosity about the place of farming at the heart of a living 'cultural landscape' and the way that the upland farming culture has been represented in literature.

The term 'cultural landscape' came into use in the 1980s. The phrase was coined by the team developing the bid for the Lake District National Park to become a UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation) World Heritage Site. An early application for World Heritage Site status under the category 'Natural Landscape' had been unsuccessful because the landscape of the National Park has been and still is heavily influenced by human activities. The campaign for World Heritage Site Status explains it thus:

bids in 1986 and 1989 were deferred because the Lake District did not fit into the categories of World Heritage sites that existed then. In 1993 UNESCO introduced 'Cultural Landscape' as a World Heritage Site category. This was in direct response to the Lake District's previous nominations.⁶

The term 'cultural landscape' has now been used for the designation of World Heritage Sites across the globe but the Lake District is still waiting for recognition. The outcome of the bid will be formally announced in July 2017. One of the main UNESCO consultants for the current bid is Susan Denyer, Secretary of the UK national committee of International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS-UK). Denyer explains the term:

In World Heritage terms, UNESCO defines cultural landscapes as the 'combined works of nature and of man' that are 'illustrative of the evolution of human society and settlement over time, under the influence of the physical constraints and/or opportunities presented by their natural environment and of successive social, economic and cultural forces, both external and internal.'⁷

⁶ <http://lakesworldheritage.co.uk/faqs/#previous> [accessed July 17, 2015].

⁷ Susan Denyer, 'The Lake District Landscape: Natural or Cultural?' in John K. Walton and Jason Wood, eds., *The Making of a Cultural Landscape* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013), p.4.

While the Cumbrian landscape has also been shaped by mining (notably copper, slate and graphite) and a once burgeoning charcoal industry, the dominant and most persistent impression of humans on the appearance of the land comes from farming practice. The impact of farming and the knowledge of farmers about the land have for decades existed alongside the work of conservationists calling for protection of land from over-development or changes that make excessive disturbance to the natural or cultural environment. The application for World Heritage Site status highlights farming and conservation together with the literary and artistic heritage of the region as three pillars; these are considered to be ‘outstanding universal values’, or elements that are uniquely shaped by locality and whose influence and value can be deemed to be universal. The Operational Guidelines give the following definition:

Outstanding Universal Value means cultural and/or natural significance which is so exceptional as to transcend national boundaries and to be of common importance for present and future generations of all humanity. As such, the permanent protection of this heritage is of the highest importance to the international community as a whole. (*Operational Guidelines*, p.11).

In the Lake District National Park, towns and villages account for a very small percentage of the 885 square miles (2,292 square kilometres) of total land. Although the topography of fells and valleys in the Lake District has been shaped over millennia by forces including volcanoes, glaciation and rivers, the appearance of the landscape has been shaped by human activity: the felling of trees to permit grazing, many miles of stone walls, woodland management including coppicing, the creation of ‘forests’ as crops, mining and quarrying, and farmsteads built from local stone and with distinct architectural features. Field patterns have evolved over time, incorporating lower inbye land that is improved through the addition of fertiliser and walled-in intakes slightly higher up the hill. Beyond these, the wide open fell tops are common land making up for 25% of the entire land mass (and is in fact the largest area of common land in western Europe). The farming system has an impact on well over 50% of the national park’s land when inbye land and intakes are taken into account. Julia Aglionby, chair of the Foundation for Common Land, says, ‘What happens on the

Denyer refers to the *Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention* (Paris: UNESCO World Heritage Centre, November July 2015).
<http://whc.unesco.org/en/guidelines/> [accessed 10 March 2016].

Commons is phenomenally significant, and probably half of Cumbria is farmed by Commoners.’⁸

When I first started working with farmers in 2011 I was ignorant of the attitudes, work and challenges faced by the people who were invested, through business and through family tradition and personal emotions, in this fifty percent of land. This was in spite of my own extensive walks and reading about the area. I began to learn, quickly, from the act of *doing* rather than from the act of *reading* – not only because relevant texts were hard to come by, but also because learning through physical engagement with tasks, through walking through landscape, and through conversations, has a depth and a richness that cannot be contained within books.

Almost every farmer I met shared their view with me that they felt poorly understood, inadequately acknowledged, and overlooked. The observation cannot be ignored, and while there is more than one reason for a lack of understanding the pervasive impression of literature is held to be extremely significant. In writing about the influence of poetry on perception of place, Fiona Stafford (2010) considers what has happened in Cumbria:

Since the early nineteenth century, many readers who have never been to Cumbria have still learned to love its imagined mountains and communities, sharing the sense of connectedness created by writing, because poetry invites readers to participate in its local truth.⁹

How ‘local truth’ might be portrayed, however, is solely down to the presentation by the writer or artist. And while it is preposterous to imagine that there is such a thing as a single truth, or that any art form or science could capture this, it is important to consider the way that literature and art affect perceptions of place; and that such perceptions go on to influence where visitors choose to go, how they encounter place, their expectations and presumptions, and the blind spots that form as a result of what is read. This is not a new phenomenon. In his introduction to a 1926 edition of Wordsworth’s *Guide to the Lakes*

⁸ Julia Aglionby, in an interview for Land Keepers, 2013: <http://landkeepers.co.uk/#/julia-aglionby/4580312109> [accessed September 10, 2016].

⁹ Fiona Stafford, *Local Attachments: The Province of Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 88.

(1810), the British literary critic Ernest de Selincourt refers to the power of Wordsworth's writing in shaping a perception of 'Lakeland':

Nowadays, alike by tourist and by student, Wordsworth is regarded not merely as a prophet of Lakeland, but almost as its first discoverer. Yet at the time of the poet's birth it was already becoming a popular resort, and in the last quarter of the eighteenth century no part of England was more often the subject of description and illustration.¹⁰

It is notable that Wordsworth was the first widely-read writer who wrote sensitively about the lives of non-gentrified people, including farmers in the region, and revealed farming practices in ways that previously had not been considered. This was radical at the time. He was familiar, for instance, with field systems and understood the idea of hefting, whereby sheep 'know their place'. But it is important to note that in large part he gleaned his information from secondary sources and from hearing stories. On hefting, for instance, he quotes the words of his 'grey-haired dame':

that though the storm
Drive one of these poor creatures miles and miles,
If he can crawl he will return again
To his own hills, the spots where when a lamb
He learnt to pasture at his mother's side.¹¹

Wordsworth's poem 'Michael',¹² which has been taken as an important representation of the state of farming families during his lifetime, was in fact based on a story of a previous generation. In it he relates the departure of a farmer's son to the city in an attempt to earn money and later return to the farm; but the son does not return, and the farm falls into ruin, along with the sheep fold that the father and son began to build, but which was never completed. The popularity of Wordsworth's writing led to the dissemination of a particular message about hill farming and this story of loss and passing within a local context has fuelled an opinion about the demise of hill farming that has persisted long after Wordsworth's death. Terry McCormick, who was curator at the Wordsworth Trust for

¹⁰ William Wordsworth, *Guide to the Lakes*, ed. by Stephen Gill (London: Frances Lincoln, 2004), p. xii.

¹¹ William Wordsworth, *The Prelude, The Four Texts (1798, 1799, 1805, 1850)*, ed. by John Wordsworth (London: Penguin, 1995), Book VIII, l. 253-257, p. 310.

¹² In *William Wordsworth Selected Poems*, ed. by Sandra Anstey (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 58-72.

fifteen years, points out the problem: those who knew less about farming than Wordsworth accepted his writing to be a representation of truth. In McCormick's view, Wordsworth's perception has thus been consolidated into a 'mainstream cultural and academic hegemony.'¹³

Of course Wordsworth cannot take full responsibility for any mainstream view of the Lake District, or for public perceptions of hill farming in this region. So before I look in more detail at some of his writing I will outline some other literary works that over time have added to a literary presentation of landscape and human culture and have influenced public perceptions. What one finds is a form of literary colonisation of place.

Wordsworth's writing about the Lake District followed in the wake of writer and poet Thomas Gray's journal (published posthumously in 1775), and the 1778 *Guide to the Lakes* by Thomas West, which was the first 'tourist' guide to the area. Both of these popular publications emphasised the beauty of the area and were heavily influenced by the idea of the 'picturesque'. This concept was introduced in the last decades of the eighteenth century by author and cleric William Gilpin as a set of rules for presenting nature in art and writing; it became a driving force for the perception and work of tourists, artists and writers. Gilpin described the picturesque as 'that peculiar kind of beauty, which is agreeable in a picture'.¹⁴ Another way of stating this might be as a quest for 'a nature tamed by art' (McCormick, p. 615). However it is defined, its influence was strong.

In the picturesque movement, hill farmers and shepherds are peripheral to the beauty of the area; the landscape, at its most beautiful, is unpeopled, or inhabited in a picturesque or painterly way that will satisfy the eye and uphold an ideal of exemplary morals. Thomas West outlines his expectations of landscape and its inhabitants thus:

That you are placed in one of the most beautiful districts in the kingdom, the number of visitors of all ranks constantly testify ... And if you be not the happiest of people, the fault must be in yourselves; since nature has

¹³ Terry McCormick, 'Wordsworth and the Shepherds', in *The Oxford Handbook of William Wordsworth*, ed. by Richard Gravil and Daniel Robinson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 643.

¹⁴ William Gilpin, *An Essay on Prints*, Fifth Edition (London: A. Strahan, 1802), p. xii (source <https://archive.org/details/essayprints00gilp> [accessed June 17, 2016]).

bountifully bestowed upon every essential requisite of enjoyment ... Keep your highways in good order ... Preserve your native modesty, and never let envy mar your civility. When you prune a fence joining to the public road, put their branches where they can be no annoyance; and then, as you already are exemplary in many moral virtues; you will set a pattern of rural decency worthy of the imitation of several politer parts of the kingdom.¹⁵

There were other guide writers who focused on the Lake District as a landscape to be appreciated for its beauty above all else. Among them was Harriet Martineau, often credited as the first female sociologist in England, whose *Guide to the Lakes* was published in 1855, less than ten years after her move to Ambleside. In it she projected a view of hill farmers as a people struggling to make ends meet and having a tendency to drink too much. For instance:

I think, if you have ever been high up in the most secluded of the mountain hollows, you will think the blank ignorance and apathy there the worst of all. the man leaves home now and then: and, even if he gets drunk, three times a year or so, he hears people speak, and receives ideas. His wife has become scarcely able to speak. You could with difficulty understand her; and her gestures and voice are savage and almost alarming.¹⁶

Harriet Martineau's tone reflects her own sensibilities, perhaps: nevertheless, and despite the historical time difference, the extreme condescension cannot be overlooked, nor can the potential for its influence be ignored, as Martineau was a prolific writer and contributor to journals and newspapers.

At the turn of the twentieth century, the writing of Beatrix Potter began to gain popularity. Potter's most famous and influential books were her children's stories (*The Peter Rabbit* series). These fictionalised life on Lake District farms, taking animals as the central characters; but in fact Beatrix Potter's real passion was the natural world around her, Herdwicks and the conservation of the Lake District as a landscape peopled and worked by farmers. She was a widely respected Herdwick breeder (known by her married name Mrs

¹⁵ Thomas West, *A Guide to the Lakes, 2nd Edition* (London: Richardson and Urquhart & Kendal: Pennington, 1780), pp. 277-278.

¹⁶ Quoted in Michael Hill, *An Independent Woman's Lake District Writings : Harriet Martineau* (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books/ Prometheus Books, 2004), pp. 154-155.

Heelis) and together with her contemporary and great friend Canon Rawnsley, she was instrumental in the formation of the National Trust. The popularity of her children's books, however, followed a trend of writings that emphasised beauty and some sort of idyll. Arthur Ransome in *Swallows and Amazons* (1930) does not include farming in the landscape that he chooses to portray as a utopia, or a place of escape and wonder, for the central characters in his book. Millions of copies were sold and the story has been re-enacted and shared as a TV adaptation,¹⁷ a radio play,¹⁸ and as a film.¹⁹ And when Alfred Wainwright introduced his first of his Lake District *Pictorial Guides* in 1955 he shared a view of the Lake District as a series of fells that represent achievements and goals for walkers - a perception that has persisted and is still popular: there is an obsession with what has come to be known as 'Wainwright bagging', or the successful climbing of each of the fells he describes. In seven volumes (1955-1966) Wainwright details walks to 214 summits; he barely mentions hill farming.

This is by no means an exhaustive record of literature but it touches on the names and publications that are most widely known as a way of indicating a progression since the time of Wordsworth, and the impact of his particular view of the Lake District. This impact includes a romantic view. In *The Prelude*, Wordsworth's epic biographical piece (shared in 1805 and later edited), in particular in Book VIII, he describes his early encounters with shepherds and the effect they had on him:

My first human love,
As has been mentioned, did incline to those
Whose occupations and concerns were most
Illustrated by nature and adorned,
And shepherds were the men who pleased me first (lines 78-182, p. 306)

He later writes about the depth of this impression on him:

A rambling schoolboy, thus
Have I beheld him, without knowing why
Have felt his presence in his own domain
As of a lord and master, or a power,
Or genius (lines 390-394, p. 318)

¹⁷ BBC 1963, directed by Peter Saunders.

¹⁸ BBC Radio 4, 1999, adapted by David Wood.

¹⁹ EMI 1974, director Claude Whatham, produced by Richard Pilbrow; and BBC Films 2016 directed by Philippa Lowthorpe.

Wordsworth elevates the shepherd - not just the particular shepherd he sees, but the idea of all shepherds:

His form hath flashed upon me glorified
By the deep radiance of the setting sun (lines 404-405, p. 318)

In the same text, Wordsworth insists that he is not being overly romantic: 'Not such as in Arcadian fastnesses / Sequestered handed down among themselves / (So ancient poets sing) the golden age' (lines 183-184, p. 306). Yet the historical context of his writing at a time when the Picturesque movement was in full swing, and his own personal quest for harmonious living both personally and politically, cannot be overlooked. Wordsworth's own 'local truth' influenced his writings about this particular place, and about its inhabitants whom he wished to perceive of having a life of perfection:

a district on all sides
The fragrance breathing of humanity:
Man free, man working for himself, with choice
Of time, and place, and object; by his wants,
His comforts, native occupations, cares,
Conducted on to individual ends
Or social, and still followed by a train
Unwooded, unthought of even – simplicity,
And beauty, and inevitable grace. (lines 150-158)

Wordsworth in other poems, notably 'Michael' (1800), 'The Last of the Flock' and 'Repentance, a Pastoral Ballad' (both in *Lyrical Ballads*, 1798, written with Samuel Taylor Coleridge) recalls the sadness of farms passing out of use. He continues this thread in his *Guide to the Lakes* (1835) where he laments the passing of a time when farming was at its best. In this and other writings he gave the impression that the culture was doomed to pass away:

Towards the head of these Dales was found a perfect Republic of Shepherds and Agriculturalists ... The chapel was the only edifice that presided over these dwellings, the supreme head of the pure Commonwealth; the members of which existed in the midst of a powerful empire like an ideal society or an organized community, whose constitution had been imposed and regulated by the mountains which protected it.²⁰

²⁰ *Guide to the Lakes*, p. 74.

Many other writers, including Harriet Martineau, reiterated a picture of a culture in decline.

They go on practicing their old-fashioned methods of tillage and herding, living in their primitive abodes, and keeping up old customs, and even a manner of speech, which are elsewhere almost obsolete. It will not be so for long. Their agriculture cannot hold its ground against modern improvements.²¹

To believe that a culture is in a state of inevitable decline is also to declare that it is lacking resilience and this in turn can feed into a romantic, elegiac sense of a place. In actual fact, the hill farming community was not only resilient at the time, quite contrary to what these popular writers were suggesting, but was beginning to establish collective organisations and shows, something that McCormick emphasises:

The underlying reality is that the culture was not becoming extinct in his {Wordsworth's} life-time; an indicator of this was the emergence of a new professionalism in the formation of associations and agricultural shows (five before 1850) and the production of five Shepherds' Guides [...] This professionalism has underpinned the resilience of hill farming since 1850 and it has not become extinct some 212 years later. (McCormick, p. 644)

The idea of a 'perfect republic' hints at Wordsworth's personal ideology and wish for social justice and it also carries the influence of pastoralism; a backward looking lamentation to a lost 'Golden Age' and a tendency to celebrate nature as something beautiful and perfect, where lives are easy and delightful. Despite Wordsworth's modernity in writing about the common people, he is still caught within the pastoral tradition; what he writes is based on reality, but is a partial and coloured version. As Gifford describes it:

... pastoral is a discourse, a way of using language that constructs a different kind of world from that of realism.²²

The influence of the Picturesque on Wordsworth's writing, and on the subsequent way views are celebrated in the Lake District, is also significant. Thomas West's *Guide to the*

²¹ Hill, 2004, p. 67.

²² Terry Gifford, *Pastoral* (London: Routledge, 1999) p. 45.

Lakes was in wide circulation by the time William took over the tenancy of Dove Cottage in Grasmere, with his sister Dorothy, in 1799. McCormick picks up on this:

Insofar as landscape was pictorial, then, it was something distinct from nature, something mentally composed by a viewer familiar with the art of painting and its rules, and probably also with the precepts of Gilpin and other writers on the picturesque. At least a few of what may seem - at first - Wordsworth's most original formulations reflect their influence. (McCormick, p. 615)

The persistent popularity of Wordsworth's writing has much justification and he ignited interest in the landscape and the power of walking to enrich wellbeing. This is one of his legacies. Through this and his campaigns to protect landscape from excessive building and indeed limit the numbers of people within the Lake District (he was a vociferous opponent of the extension of the railway line from Windermere to Keswick in 1844), he has been credited with influencing both the conservation movement in the UK and the establishment of the National Park systems. This is acknowledged as part of the nomination for the Lake District as a World Heritage Site:

Wordsworth's writings included other concepts developed from a deep knowledge and love of the English Lake District which have had widespread and fundamental importance for the landscape conservation movement. These included an early concept of human ecology - termed the 'economy of nature', which envisioned a harmonious relationship between humans and nature - and an expression of the idea of nationally-protected landscapes, which is widely accepted as the first iteration of the idea of national parks.²³

This is not the place for a detailed analysis of his work but I would like to suggest that there has been a continuation of idyllic sentiment in Wordsworth's elegiac and Romantic writings into the twenty-first century. The idea of perfection in daffodils and wandering 'lonely as a cloud'²⁴ adds to the expectation of the Lake District as 'perfect' and unchanging. (This poem, claims the Wordsworth Trust, is 'the most famous in the English Language'²⁵). In doing so, it dims the general public's ability to meet the Lake District without preconceptions, or to

²³ Lake District National Park Partnership, *Nomination of the English Lake District for World Heritage Site Status*, Vol. 2, Section 2, p. 55.

²⁴ William Wordsworth, *William Wordsworth Selected Poems*, ed. by Sandra Antsey (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 96.

²⁵ <https://wordsworth.org.uk/poetry/historical-poetry/daffodils.html> [accessed 10 April 2016].

perceive the culture of contemporary farming within a landscape they have already constructed in their minds.

William Wordsworth is not the only influence on public opinion, but he is the most often quoted writer in relation to the Lake District and has been for two hundred years. The Lake District was referred to as ‘Wordsworth Country’ as a promotion to tourists and the phrase has been reintroduced more recently:

“We want people to think of it as Wordsworth Country again,” said Paul Kleian, communications head at the {Wordsworth} trust. “After all, it was while he was here, and living in Grasmere in particular, that he had his incredibly productive eight-year period from 1799, producing and revising works like the *Lyrical Ballads*, *The Recluse* and *The Prelude*.”²⁶

Wordsworth’s legacy of poetry, prose, letters and guides, published in his lifetime and posthumously, has been a mix of curse and blessing for hill farmers. To reintroduce the classification of the Lake District as ‘Wordsworth Country’ in 2016 is to perpetuate a ‘local truth’ and to do a disservice to the hill farming community by continuing to overwrite their culture and underestimate their resilience. Terry McCormick expresses Wordsworth’s continuing influence thus:

The widespread and continuing belief in the Wordsworth vision and version of the Lake District is quite understandable; his knowledge and insight is exceptional; his passion is intense; and his communication is powerful and memorable. But this legacy, with its two perspectives, is located in an underestimation of the resilience of hill farming. One was spiritual, recreational, cultural tourism box office (Matthew Arnold, Mary Ward, Arthur Ransome, Alfred Wainwright) in which hill farmers were back-grounded and in Wainwright’s offerings (sales of books reaching 2.5 million in 2010), almost entirely erased. The other was associated with Wordsworth, less directly, through Canon H. D. Rawnsley, Beatrix Potter, and the emerging National Trust community which has led to the trust ownership of ninety-four hill farms.²⁷

²⁶ Vanessa Thorpe, ‘Not just daffodils – Wordsworth Country makes a comeback for literary tourism’ in *The Guardian*, Saturday 17 September 2016.

²⁷ Terry McCormick, ‘Wordsworth and Shepherds’ in *The Oxford Handbook of William Wordsworth*, ed. by Richard Gravil and Daniel Robinson, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 645.

Another symptom of a tendency towards emphasising beauty and an agreeable 'pastoral' or Romantic view of place is the National Park Act of 1949. Susan Denyer argues that its emphasis on protecting large areas from over-development or insensitive building styles, in spite of a commitment to protecting the vernacular architecture of farming, overlooked the contribution of farmers.

[The National Park Act] promoted access to beautiful areas without a specific recognition of the way those areas had been shaped by people, and it implied that upland areas - for all the early National Parks centred on the uplands - were somehow purely 'natural' ... natural beauty was still seen as something separate from cultural heritage.²⁸

The influence of writing on the way people 'see' landscape can last a long time, as Whyte has noted:

What WW {William Wordsworth} said in his *A Guide Through the District of the Lakes in the North of England, with A Description of the Scenery, etc. For the Use of Tourists and Residents* went on to influence and shape holistic approaches to geography in the 19th century covering not merely scenery but geology, landforms, climate, natural history, the society and economy of the inhabitants, their relationship with the landscape and their influence on the environment.²⁹

More recently, James Rebanks, farmer and author of *The Shepherds' Life* (2015), who is a supporter of the bid for World Heritage Site Status, shares his shock at an education that gives a 'dead, rich, white man's version' of the history of a 'landscape of modest, hard-working people.'³⁰ While responsibility for any single view of hill farming cannot fall on Wordsworth's shoulders, his portrayal of their lives in this region has had a considerable influence on literature, and indeed, on a sort of national consciousness, and this is highlighted in the World Heritage Site Document:

Wordsworth's 'Prelude' (1805) is one of the most fundamental works in the creation of the modern popular mind and today's social mores and was directly inspired by the English Lake District landscape and his experience of it.³¹

²⁸ *The Making of a Cultural Landscape*, p. 20.

²⁹ I. Whyte, 'Wordsworth's *Guide to the Lakes* and the geographical tradition', *Armitt Library Journal* 1 (1998), pp. 21-22.

³⁰ James Rebanks, *The Shepherd's Life* (Penguin Random House Group, 2015), p. 6.

³¹ Nomination of the English Lake District for World Heritage Site Status, Vol. 2, Section 2, p. 53.

Wordsworth offers inspiration to find spiritual fulfilment from landscape, and invites a consideration of the lives of those who live there, albeit in a Romantic fashion. McCormick, writing in 2012, sees a problem with a continuing 'invisibility' of hill farming:

The current 2012 circumstance with its potentially toxic combination of free market ideology, ecological zealotry (anti-sheep grazing) and the cultural invisibility of hill farming is a unique systemic challenge. A starting point for meeting this challenge is the fact that every day, perhaps every hour, the 'economy of nature' in the Lake District continues to generate beauty. This is a testament to the enduring value of places and landscapes shaped and managed by a hill-farming community. (McCormick, p. 645)

The largest or loudest voice in the 'anti-sheep farming' camp that McCormick refers to above is the influential environmental journalist George Monbiot, whose term 'sheepwrecked' was used to describe Britain's uplands in 2013 when he wrote in his blog about the way 'Britain has been shagged by the white plague'.³² McCormick states that it is the pairing of anti-farming views with the 'cultural invisibility' of farming, rather than any one influence on its own, that is problematic. And in a paradox, while the Lake District's bid for World Heritage Site Status seeks to celebrate hill farming and raise awareness of hill farmers, the art and literature that it celebrates at the same time is part of a canon including Turner, Coleridge, Ruskin, Ransome, Wainwright and Beatrix Potter, only one of whom, the last, was in a position to reflect accurately on farming from first-hand experience: a human element that has been at the heart of the landscape for at least a thousand years, and still is, has gone largely unseen. It is, as the CEO of the Lake District National Park Authority says, 'a rich story, so often not apparent to the casual observer of the magnificent landscape that is the Lake District National Park.'³³

In a deeper understanding of the complexity of life on the fells - human, animal, vegetable and mineral - it feels imperative to listen to all the elements involved. Thus even if the Lake District does not attain UNESCO recognition as a globally important cultural landscape, as a place of dwelling it nevertheless persists. It is a landscape shaped by work and tasks, what the anthropologist Tim Ingold would call a 'taskscape' and to overlook the engineers of that

³² <http://www.monbiot.com/2013/05/30/sheepwrecked/> [accessed 31 August 2016].

³³ Richard Leafe, CEO Lake District National Park, in conversation for Land Keepers (Fraser & Fraser) 2014.

land would be to only partially understand it. Ingold discusses the way that:

every path or track shows up as the accumulated imprint of countless journeys that people have made - with or without their vehicles or domestic animals - as they have gone about their everyday business. Thus the same movement is embodied, on the side of the people, in their 'muscular consciousness', and on the side of the landscape, in its network of paths and tracks. In this network is sedimented the activity of an entire community, over many generations. It is the taskscape made visible.³⁴

Without knowing it, before spending time with hill farmers, I had been subject to what Ingold might call a neat stitching over – the partial representation of this landscape, in effect pulling the wool over people’s eyes. Ingold is insistent that the role of story should be revelatory:

Telling a story is not like weaving a tapestry to cover up the world, it is rather a way of guiding the attention of the listeners or readers into it.³⁵

Being with farmers allows me to have my own, albeit temporary, dwelling among them and to appreciate the Lake District as a ‘taskscape’ where, ‘just as the landscape is an array of related features, so - by analogy - the taskscape is an array of related activities.’³⁶ Crucially, it helps in the avoidance of the pitfalls that are inevitable when treating passed-down or third-hand stories as fact; and it allows me to meet the very people that should be telling their own story. This practice has, I believe, helped me to present a realistic view of hill farming at this point of time; it has also been crucial in a gradual gaining of trust, which has allowed me to continually deepen my own understanding. If this were an ethnographic study, the practice would, in Lindsay Hamilton’s opinion, be essential:

To approach an ethnography of rural life, it is often helpful to begin from a particular cultural space such as the village pub, the annual livestock or produce show, the shop. To hang around, chat and blend in is vital.³⁷

³⁴ Tim Ingold, ‘The Temporality of the Landscape’, *World Archaeology*, Vol. 25, No. 2, ‘Conceptions of Time and Ancient Society’ (October 1993), p. 167.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p.153.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 158.

³⁷ Lindsay Hamilton, ‘Ethnography beyond the country and the city: Understanding the symbolic terrain of rural spaces’, *Ethnography* 17(3) (2016), p. 298.

By way of forming relationships over time, I have been able to share my work with the people about whom I have written. On this subject, Terry McCormick's words about the manner in which Wordsworth conducted his own writing are particularly relevant.

Wordsworth, without the later decorum of anthropological sensitivity, assumes the voice of the hill-farming community through a mutation of the family tradition of land agency. This ownership and mediation will be meaningless for the majority of hill farmers and shepherds because it will not be known in their daily lives, and Wordsworth has not received the honour of their permission. Who they are, what they do, and what they mean will now be put into a literary/aesthetic map which, over time will be used to respond, think and administer. The culture of the region is divided between those who hand-make the landscape and are its curators and those who associate with it and read it. (McCormick, p. 646).

The generosity and openness of the farmers with whom I worked, and others who I met many times over at shows and sales and on farms and fells, have been an enormous privilege. I didn't experience any farmers romanticising their life, so my intention was to avoid this in my writing. This is not to say the farmers I spoke to did not have an appreciation of landscape; in fact, they love the places where they live and acknowledge the landscape as beautiful, and most say they would not want to live anywhere else. But a perception of beauty is not the same as the romanticising of place, which makes it ideal, and is to divorce it from the physical, messy, tough and challenging reality of work in what are often extremely hard conditions. I wanted, rather than to romanticise the farmers' lives, to capture their culture. This is a loaded word that could be defined and analysed but I take it here in the sense it was given to me in a conversation I had with a farmer in Borrowdale. He stressed to me that farming in the uplands is not 'agri-business', like much arable and livestock farming in the lowlands; in his view, upland farming is 'agri-culture'.³⁸ It is a way of life, rooted in traditions, wedded to the land, whose continuation is reliant on the passing down of traditions and knowledge gained from the physical act of working with livestock, land and weather.

'I suppose farming once got a lot of bad press didn't it,' Says Joe, 'but it wasn't this type of farming, it was down country farming. What happened in the

³⁸ Joe Relph, in conversation with H. Fraser and Yew Tree Farm, Borrowdale (2013) <http://landkeepers.co.uk/#/joe-relph/4569742626> [accessed 16 March 2016].

lowlands was used as ammunition to have a go at all farming. I think we've got to get our type of farming seen in a better light by the public.'³⁹

It has been important for me to include the direct speech of farmers in the writing of the almanac and in some of the poetry. Equally critical to my work has been to offer some of my writing back to the farmers, both in the form of poetry placed into their own environment, and through exhibitions. The most significant to date has been the showing of *Land Keepers* in the heart of 'Wordsworth Country' in the Wordsworth Museum in Grasmere.⁴⁰ The car park was as full of pickups and four-wheel-drives as any auction mart, and the museum, which houses Wordsworth's original manuscripts, saw more farmers on one night than it had in its entire history. In an interesting turn, I took a handful of farmers into the Reading Rooms where they read from first edition copies of Wordsworth's work, and surmised the true locations described in some of his writing; 150 years on, it was shared with them, in the heart of a country that is as much theirs (or more so) than it is his. I was also invited to read at the Annual General Meeting of the Herdwick Sheep Breeders Association. To my knowledge, this was the first time that poetry had been read at any of these meetings. I was credited with the feedback, from the chair of the society, that if he had been able to write poetry he would have wanted to have written it exactly as I had.

At the time of the exhibition in Grasmere, James Rebanks was tweeting anonymously about farming, and gaining a substantial following before his first book, *The Shepherd's Life*, was published in 2015. In the intervening years it has sold millions of copies, has been serialised for Radio 4 (Book of the Week May 2016), translated into several languages and been made into a stage play. In the neighbouring Yorkshire Dales National Park, other farmers including Amanda Owen⁴¹ are gaining a wide following through the publication of books and through social media.

When I began my thesis, this increase in contemporary writing about upland farming had not yet gained momentum but over the last two years I have been working and writing in

³⁹ Harriet Fraser, interview with Joe Relph, *Land Keepers*, 2013: <http://landkeepers.co.uk/#/joe-relph/4569742626> [accessed 16 March 2016].

⁴⁰ The *Land Keepers* exhibition was in place in the Wordsworth Museum February-May 2014, with over 10,000 people passing through.

⁴¹ Amanda Owen's book *The Yorkshire Shepherdess* (London: Pan Macmillan, 2004) will soon be followed by a second book, *Ravenseat*, which is the name of her farm.

the midst of this growing exposure and a greater interest among the public. Whether this 'public' is still drawn by the romantic image of a 'perfect republic' and a fluffy white Easter lamb⁴² is uncertain, and to analyse this is not within the scope of this thesis. But it is relevant that my own approach complements and enlarges that of Rebanks and others and is part the current representation of farming that shares stories from a living culture more widely than ever before, and with greater accuracy. This is not just down to the way it has been written about, it is also a case of popular interest: there is a mutual influence between what is given and what is sought out.

As was the case with the popular demand for picturesque paintings influencing styles of art, or the demand for Beatrix Potter's Peter Rabbit stories outweighing demand for her works on natural history, the arrival of realistic stories of shepherding is meeting a demand for real life stories, in real time, that celebrate both the beauty of the National Park and the reality of farming life within the park. As hill farmer Carl Walters said on BBC's Countryfile in 2014:

People like to walk in the Lake District and come here because it is a living landscape, you know, a lot of people we see, who come here on holiday, like nothing better than to see you gathering the fells with your dogs.⁴³

This thesis is not engineered as a book to be fed into the public domain as is the case with *The Shepherd's Life*; rather it reveals the outcome of my practice. I have chosen to spend time with farmers, to compose notes in the field, and to maintain the present tense in my almanac. Through this and the experimentation of sending poetry onto the fells and onto farms, where it is infused with movement, I aim to convey a culture that is highly active in the continually unfolding present, and in mutual relationship with the land.

I'd like to quote the author John Fowles in underlining the value of keen observation, and recording, in the present moment. While Fowles may be talking specifically about flora in nature, I use his words because in my view the human species is as much a part of 'nature' and is no less dynamic, changeable, reactive and interactive. In an understanding of culture,

⁴² Even though Herdwick lambs are black and on upland farms arrive at least a month after Easter: it is the lowland flocks that have white lambs early in the year.

⁴³ *Countryfile*, BBC1, January 26, 2014.

particularly where that culture relates so intimately with the land, all living entities have equal 'presentness'.

We lack trust in the present, this moment, this actual seeing, because our culture tells us to trust only the reported back, the publicly framed, the edited, the thing set in the clearly artistic or the clearly scientific angle or perspective. One of the deepest lessons we have to learn is that nature, of its nature, resists this. It waits to be seen otherwise, in its individual presentness and from our individual presentness.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ John Fowles, *The Tree* (London: Vintage, 2000), p. 55-6.

**Development:
some literary context and the evolution of my work**

*Memorial and more;
There's inheritance in trods,
In dry-stone walls,
In the slow shaping of a quick hedge.*

Tom Rawling⁴⁵

My practice of working alongside farmers began at the same time as I was developing my own writing with an increasing emphasis on poetry. I wanted to use poetry to capture my experience in the fells in a way that can't be done through lengthier prose; and for the prose section I wanted to follow the format of an almanac, incorporating, verbatim, words from the farmers. I was building on a personal background of prose writing and documentary, and this MPhil has been an opportunity for my work to evolve. The work I did for *Land Keepers*⁴⁶ (2011-2014) followed on from previous projects documenting the stories of other people, events and place.⁴⁷ Inevitably, my own poems follow in the footsteps of a long tradition and I have inherited, with some incorporation and some rejection, elements of other poetry about farming, landscape and nature.

I began to expand my reading to encompass poetry that is hundreds of years old, with the essential inclusion of Wordsworth – not just William Wordsworth but also the journals of his sister Dorothy (first published in 1958⁴⁸), which offer the close observation that daily records provide as well as a sense of the passing of the seasons. Other past writers whose

⁴⁵ Tom Rawling, 'Ancestors' in *Ghosts at My Back* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), p.39.

⁴⁶ www.landkeepers.co.uk

⁴⁷ Including : *The Love Project* (Women's stories of love over fifty years, 2013/2014; www.barrowloveproject.co.uk); *What Our Mothers Never Told Us* (2012; www.whatourmothersnevertoldus.com); *Birth and Beyond* (Random House, 2005); *The Rough Guide to India* (The Rough Guides / Penguin 1992-1995).

⁴⁸ Mary Moorman, ed., *Journals of Dorothy Wordsworth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1958).

work has had some influence on my own - either my writing or my way of seeing - include one of the early English nature writers, John Clare (1793-1864), whose free-flow of thought carries an intense sense of what Fowles might call 'presentness'; and some whose writing has also been enormously influential on observational and critical writing about the environment such as the naturalist John Muir (1838–1914), whose records of his time in the Sierra Nevada working with sheep contain explicit detail about landscape, and Henry D. Thoreau, whose *Walden* (1854) has become a classic philosophical reflection on nature.

While William Wordsworth's writing about the Lake District is globally renowned, the Cumbria-inspired poems of Tom Rawling have been hidden. I was introduced to his work by his nephew, Will Rawling, who farms in Ennerdale in the northwest of the Lake District; Will's son now lives in the house that the Rawling family built in 1545 and the family roots go back beyond written historical records. Tom Rawling comes from this long line of farmers. Born in 1916 he grew up on a farm but he did not stay: this was not his chosen profession. He became a teacher and turned to poetry later in life, writing *Ghosts at my Back*, in 1982. The collection centres on life and farming in Ennerdale. Rawling was a contemporary of Ted Hughes and Anne Stevenson as well as Seamus Heaney; but in contrast to their continued recognition, his poetry has sunk into relative obscurity.

It was the work of Cumbrian writer Michael Baron and the Lamplugh and District Heritage Society that brought Rawling's work back to light in 2010, something celebrated by Grevel Lindop who claims that 'anyone who loves poetry or Lakeland needs to know these poems.'⁴⁹

Rawling's writing has a pithy, earthy rawness in its revelations of the daily details of farming and intricate description of the landscape. His keen observation of place and people reveals a deep connection with his childhood roots and a tradition of farming. His writing also carries a sense of disconnection, arising from his own physical displacement from his childhood landscape of known paths, walls, rocks, fells and activities.

⁴⁹ Grevel Lindop, December 2010, <http://grevel.co.uk/poetry/tom-rawling-a-lake-poet-rediscovered/> [accessed 12 February 2015].

Enough to hear
 The names of the fells –
 Herdus, Pillar, and Red Pike;
 Fields and flowers –
 Broad Close, Wham and Fittimer,
 Gowan, ling, and cotton-grass;
 Farms and their people –
 How Hall, Hollins, and Howside,
 Birkett, Rawling, Williamson;
 Enough to know
 I belonged to the place.⁵⁰

Naming of place and family names lifts the landscape and the story of this poem out of the realm of imagination or generalisation into a real, located and peopled place. And his writing is deeply sensual, its descriptions stemming from the body more than from a reasoning intellect. For instance, in 'I Am What I Was':

We used to creep through coppices
 Setting bow and arrow ambushes.
 Chin to the ground I breathed its breath.
 In the tasting of grass we were gourmets.⁵¹

This proud admittance of getting close to the earth and experiencing its flavour brings a powerful sense of presence into Rawling's writing. There's a vivid distinction between Rawling's tasting the grass as a 'gourmet' and Wordsworth's 'Paradise' and 'fragrance breathing of all humanity'.⁵² And farming *is* a sensual and messy experience, full of scent and taste. Rawling seems to be driven by a desire to relate his own experience rather than a temptation to idealise or romanticise his subject, yet he does have an emphasis on belonging. In 'Clipping Day' he recalls his first time, as a young boy, shearing sheep under his grandfather's tutelage. The poem begins: 'Now, I remember the fear All day identity was bleating / As I bundled fleeces' and continues:

On clipping day Grandfather surveyed us all,
 His flock of sheep and men
 New growing under, out of old,
 Predetermined shaped and wrapped
 In the fleece of his mind.
 He printed me with his family mark,
 Proud passport in that country,
 Not granted to off-comers.⁵³

⁵⁰ Rawling, p. 12.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

⁵² *The Prelude Book VIII*, line 151, p. 304.

⁵³ Rawling, p. 23.

Rawling's use of language allows for the presence of landscape *and* practice *and* personal emotion in a single stanza. It has given inspiration for me to try to do the same in some of my poems. I directly draw from Rawling for the title of my poem 'Enough to Know Their Names' (p. 112) and make reference to myself as an off-comer in one of the first poems in the almanac (Broughton Tup Sales, p. 61). This term is widely used today for people who have moved into Cumbria from elsewhere. Rawling was right: much of farming is typically beyond the reach of people from outside the profession, but off-comers do join the extended network and become part of the fold. This was the case for me, not as a worker on a farm, or the spouse of a farmer, but as a welcomed visitor.

In Rawling's collection combining observation of landscape with tales of farming, his language is not complicated. The simplicity of his lexicon adds to the impact of the poetry, allowing it to stay grounded in landscape and practice. In the context of hill farming, this is highly appropriate: the daily tasks and challenges of farming, like the landscape, demand a straight forward approach and this is reflected in Rawling's content and style. He has dispensed with the pastoral tradition and Romanticism, drawing on his embodied memory of being in place. His style appeals to me more than the effusive celebration of landscape that I find in some of Wordsworth's writing. In my own poems I have attempted to set a scene of beauty while staying grounded in simple language and form.

In contrast, in *The Recluse*, Wordsworth's rapture at the beauty of the landscape around him is so intense that he not only identifies with the essence of that landscape but he endows it with the power to identify with him. 'The Recluse (Home at Grasmere)' was written in response to his finding a sense of 'home' when he moved to Dove Cottage in Grasmere in 1799, with his sister Dorothy. He edited it several times over the following years and did not, in fact, ever consider it to be finished (it was not published until after his death). In this poem, romantic association of spirit with nature and an identification with the infinite in nature are strong; there is a Blakean blending of divine and human.

Wordsworth writes of 'Perfect contentment, Unity entire.' And asks:

What want we? Have we not perpetual streams,
Warm woods, and sunny hills, and fresh green fields,
And mountains not less green, and flocks and herds,

And thickets full of songsters, and the voice
Of lordly birds⁵⁴

He goes on to imagine that the land and the elements are talking to him (italics mine): 'The sunbeam said, "Be Happy".' And: 'It loves us now, this Vale so beautiful / *Begins to love us!*'⁵⁵

So large is the canon of writings by Wordsworth, which include letters and politically motivated writings, that the ongoing study of it has engaged hundreds of scholars. For the purpose of this thesis, I am purely considering how it presents the hill farming culture, and its depiction of that culture in the Romantic mode that was radical for its time but appears now, in 2016, to lack sensitivity, as well as inside knowledge. I have touched on this in the previous chapter. It is also worth noting that a number of scholars and editors have themselves been drawn into a form of romanticism and unbridled flattery of the poet. For example, Stephen Gill, a celebrated Wordsworth scholar, writes in his introduction to *Wordsworth's Guide to the Lakes*:

The *Guide* is multi-faceted. It *is* a guide, but it is also a prose-poem about light, shapes, and textures, about movement and stillness - what Wordsworth terms in *The Prelude* 'all the business of the elements'. It is a paean to a way of life, but also a lament for the inevitability of its passing; a treatise on building and planting and colour – and much more. What holds this diversity together is the voice of complete authority, compounded from experience, intense observation, thought, and love.⁵⁶

Gill's dedication to Wordsworth's 'complete authority' is telling. Wordsworth's own Romantic inclination can be seen against the contextual background of the political time (with among other movements, The French Revolution and the drive for the abolition of slavery) and his own desire for social and political equality, as well as his personal quest for familial harmony. As evidenced in his letters, and in those of his sister Dorothy, there was a strong if not desperate need for reunion with one another. Dorothy relates the joy she has

⁵⁴ Dorothy and William Wordsworth, *Home at Grasmere*, ed. by Colette Clark (London: Penguin Classics, 1986), lines 126-129, p. 27.

⁵⁵ *Home at Grasmere*, lines 179-180, pp. 28-29.

⁵⁶ Stephen Gill's introduction in *William Wordsworth, Guide to the Lakes* (London: Frances Lincoln, 2004), pp. vi–viii.

in William's company to her close friend Jane Pollard in a letter written on 16 February 1793:

Oh Jane the last Time we were together he won my Affect[ion] to a Degree which I cannot describe; his Attentions to me were such as the most insensible of mortals must have been touched with – there was no Pleasure that he would not have given up with joy for half an Hour's Conversation with me;⁵⁷

A subsequent letter, written on 10-12 July 1793, again to Jane Pollard, repeats the determination William and Dorothy have to be together:

It is more than two years and a half since we last saw each other & so ardent is our desire for a meeting that we are determined upon procuring to ourselves this happiness if it were even to be purchased at the price of a journey cross the Kingdom; but from North Wales to Yorkshire the distance is nothing ...⁵⁸

The siblings were driven by the need to live together and their wish to find a place they could call home, having been separated in early life following the death of their parents. This powerful desire for home and its satisfaction at Dove Cottage colours the celebration of moving to Grasmere and family togetherness expressed in *The Recluse*. The Wordsworth siblings had come home, back to Cumberland, after many years away. Tom Rawling, on the other hand, left home and did not return. He mourned the loss of connection. Both poets write about place, belonging and loss, but in very different ways, and with different motivation. Tom Rawling wrote about 'home' with a sense of longing not dissimilar to Wordsworth's but with details and knowledge of farming that could never be part of Wordsworth's work because Wordsworth was not from farming stock.

Twentieth and twenty-first century writers whose work adds to the canon that I have dipped into include Josephine Dickinson; her poems in *Silence Fell* (2007), written on a hill farm in Alston, Cumbria, capture the rawness of contemporary farming life, interwoven with her personal journey and a tale of love and loss. The legacy of celebrated Cumbrian poet Norman Nicholson (1914–1987) cannot be ignored; it provides a vivid representation of the

⁵⁷ Juliet Barker, *Wordsworth, A Life in Letters* (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 23.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

Cumbrian landscape, with the naming of places and attention to fine details of the built landscape, but he does not focus on farming in the same way as Dickinson or Rawling.

More recently, Richard Skelton's *Beyond the Fell Wall* (2015) takes a long close look at the landscape of the Duddon Valley. He uses a combination of prose and poetry and a variation of form to transmit a feeling of the landscape and layers of time, and reveals a keen intimacy with it. Nevertheless, he has little familiarity with the day-to-day life and activities of farmers in the landscape and in his writing he does not involve the farmers who tend the landscape he has come to know well. *Beyond the Fell Wall* has a preoccupation with loss rather than with the active present of the landscape and also contains some generalization about farmers instead of specifics. In this extract, Skelton makes a presumption about 'all farmers' and, furthermore, implies a universality in the approach to upkeep of walls:

Entropy: all farmers seem to implicitly understand this fundamental law. Rarely are walls mended, except to be braced by an ugliness of wooden stakes, corrugated metal and wire.⁵⁹

My experience alongside numerous farmers has shown me that it is not possible to lend any single point of view or opinion to a group of people simply by virtue of them all having this same profession. I have also observed a variety of attitudes to walls, ranging from neglect and disregard to intense pride and tidiness (with the latter being more common). My aim with the almanac, based on my meetings with farmers, has been to avoid generalisations and instead to use specifics by describing practices and events and including directly quoted speech from individual farmers.

In its hypnotic description of place and preoccupation with walls, Skelton's work takes on a stark beauty and suggests an emptiness that, I would argue, arises from his personal perception of a landscape, fuelled by his own expectations and desires, when in fact the landscape itself is not 'empty'. The lack of acknowledgement of the living *human* occupation of the land is made more pertinent by Skelton's investment of life into the walls:

⁵⁹ Richard Skelton, *Beyond the Fell Wall* (Little Toller Books, 2015), p. 38.

The wall is living, and lived in. It is as much composed of cavities, tunnels and vents – of breath itself – as it is bodied by stone. Within its recessed chambers are nests, beyond the hand’s reach. Shelters. Places of protection. *As you pass the wall, eyes are upon you, ears are listening, from within.*

Those gaps, those interstices, are the wall’s mouths each with a jutting avian or mammalian tongue. *Be careful, if you go near.*⁶⁰

Beyond Cumbria, work that relates to farming that has been published since the start of this thesis and has a crossover with my own observations of farming life include Jim Carruth’s *Killochries* (2015), a narrative poem that brings his deeply personal journey of recovery into the farming environment, entwining the two; his writing conveys a combination of sensitivity and pragmatism that reflects day-to-day farming life while revealing the central character’s personal journey of recovery. Carruth’s personal history, coming as he does from a farming family, is important and allows his writing to have a compulsive realism. For instance, on lambing he writes:

Three weeks: one field
a deluge

of births and deaths.

We work in tandem days and nights,
walking a shepherd’s trance,
straining to keep the lambs alive.

*Frae their first braith
they ar tryin fir their hinmaist.*⁶¹

This writing provides a sense of action, and the inclusion of the voice of the shepherd grounds the action in the present. The power of this piece comes from the simplicity of directly reporting what is happening, rather than from hyperbole or excessive description.

Another recent book highlighting farming life is *Exchange* (2015) a collaborative work between Chris Drury (writer) and Kay Syrad (visual artist) which combines diary-type entries with the words of farmers. The entire book draws on direct experience and an unromanticised description of daily farming life that reveals, through the simple telling of an

⁶⁰ *ibid.* p. 61.

⁶¹ Jim Carruth, *Killochries* (Glasgow: Freight Books, 2015) p. 73.

undramatized story, the knowledge of land and stock as well as the characters of the farmers who were involved. This extract offers an example:

Be careful, because sheep can read emotional states in facial expressions, they're sensitive to noise and have a very strong sense of smell, with scent glands not only near their eyes but also between their toes. They have almost panoramic vision, can see behind themselves without turning their heads and can distinguish between black, red, brown, green, yellow and white. They can recognize and remember each other's faces and yours. If worked with quietly, patiently, they can even learn their own names.⁶²

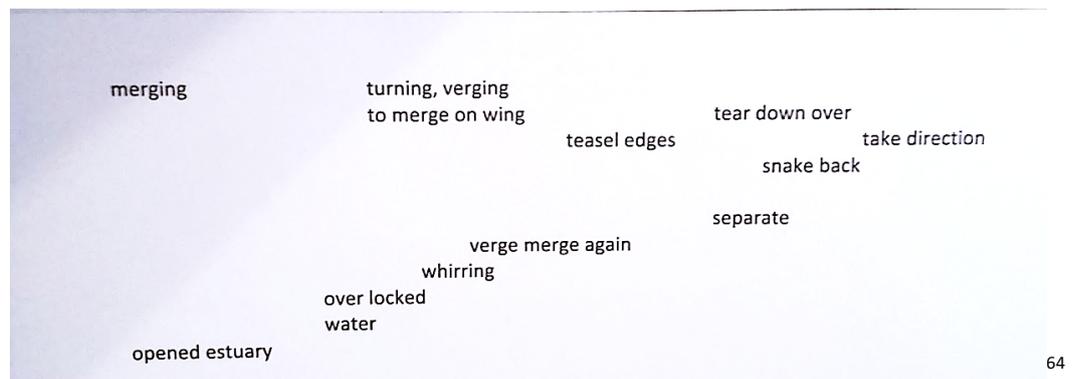
As with *Killochries*, there is an immediacy and unfiltered projection of experience. I have recognised a similarity with what I hope to achieve in my own almanac and poems.

In developing my poetry, I became particularly interested in poetry that breaks from what is considered to be the traditional form of lines on a page aligned to the left margin. The less orderly presentation of words on a page was first given recognition as 'Open Field Poetics' by Charles Olson (1950). Olson was a member of the American group of Black Mountain poets whose experimentation led to an opening out of poetry from its closed form. Their influence has been considerable and can be felt among current writers who discard traditional form in favour of an approach that uses the page as if it were a landscape, allowing space and words to carry equal weight.

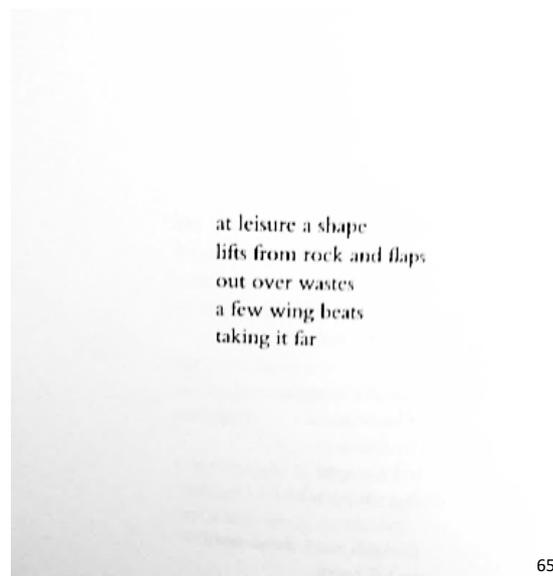
In *The Ground Aslant*⁶³ Harriet Tarlo introduces the term 'radical landscape poetry' to describe the works she has selected for this anthology of writing about land. This anthology follows on from Tarlo's own publications where she uses pared down and widely spaced writing that portrays what she perceives to be both the essence of landscape and human relationships with land (*nab*, 2007; *Field*, 2016; *behind land*, 2016). The image overleaf provides an example.

⁶² Chris Drury and Kay Syrad, *Exchange* (London: Cape Farewell & Toller Fratrum: Little Toller Books, 2015), unpaginated.

⁶³ Harriet Tarlo, ed., *The Ground Aslant: An Anthology of Radical Landscape Poetry* (Exeter: Shearsman, 2011).



In contrast to Tarlo's style of widely spacing individual words, the use of tighter form within a large white space in the work of Thomas A. Clark has also appealed to me for the way it highlights a keen observation of simple facts, enhancing the suggestion of beauty with his choice of form (*The Hundred Thousand Places*, 2009).



I have been conscious of the empty page as a formative space within a poem and my exposure to contemporary Radical Landscape poets has been part of this. Away from the two dimensional page, I have been drawn to language art and the work of artists including walking artists Hamish Fulton (b. 1946) and sculptor Richard Long (b. 1945). Both use found materials and the experience of walking in their art. Long's use of simple statements, often grounded in place names or actions and typically presented with a generous use of white

⁶⁴ Harriet Tarlo, *Behind Land* with Judith Tucker (Leeds: Wild Pansy Press, 2015). Photograph, Harriet Fraser.

⁶⁵ Thomas A Clark, *The Hundred Thousand Places* (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 2009) p. 30.

space, invites the landscape into the written piece, while offering distilled thoughts back to the space that is the landscape.



In describing his work, Long alludes to something that is of fundamental importance to me:

My work is real, not illusory or conceptual.
It is about real stones, real time, real actions.

My work is not urban, nor is it romantic.
It is the laying down of modern ideas in
the only practical paces to take them.⁶⁷

The experimental works that emerged during my time with farmers where I immersed poems in the environment follow on from this tradition.

My practical experience alongside farmers, the evolution of my writing, and my growing familiarity with the work of other poets became a three-stranded process of learning and discovery. There was a gradual unfolding. Early in the process as I interrogated my direction, I realized that I had no intention to create an ending or to arrive at a particular place. I wanted to create a beginning, and see where it went.

It strikes me now, on reflection, that this practical approach to my own work is not unlike Ingold's definition of landscape: 'the activities that comprise the taskscape are unending, the landscape is never complete.'⁶⁸ I was fully engaged in my tasks rather than being led

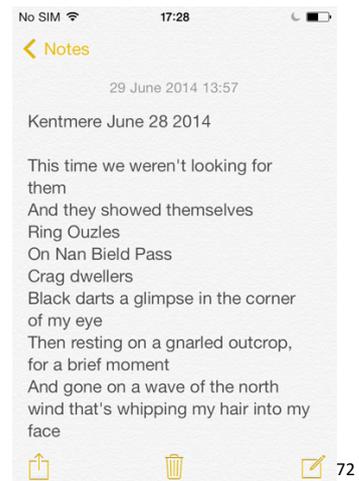
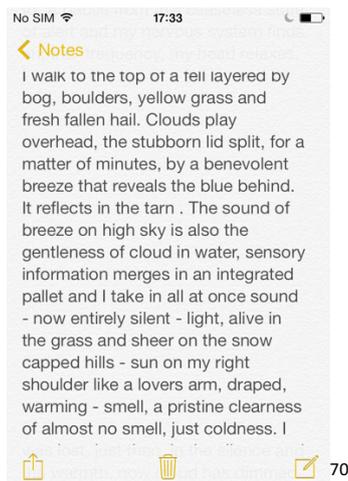
⁶⁶ Richard Long, *Heaven and Earth* (London: Tate, 2009) p. 165.

⁶⁷ *ibid.*, p. 143.

⁶⁸ Ingold, 1993, p. 12.

towards a predetermined outcome. My composition process is, crucially, led by active, physical involvement and experience. Being in the field is essential, and responding in real time is key. I use a smart phone for note making whenever it is physically convenient to do so. Thus I was tapping away on the screen while in the yard with sheep, at moments of pause during a gather, or in the noisier environment of an auction mart. I need the immediacy of this form of writing to make note of spoken words (although the additional use of a recording device offers dependable backup for accuracy) but also to capture my responses and observations of places and tasks with an immediacy and speed that reduces the inclusion/intrusion of my own interpretation. This helps me to be a witness, with minimal judgement, to other people's lives and to the landscape.

I am typically unaware of what I write when I am in the field. I email the notes to myself and when I read over them, they provide context, raw material and, often, words and phrases that find their way into a final piece of writing, certainly in the almanac and often in a poem. The words arise and I then work with them, beginning with an impulse that is not based on a preconceived plan. It is as Basil Bunting said in 'The Poet's Point of View' (1996): 'Very few artists have clear, analytical minds. They do what they do because they must.'⁶⁹ Sometimes my original notes are a starting point for a poem; less commonly, they may form a poem that I consider to be complete.



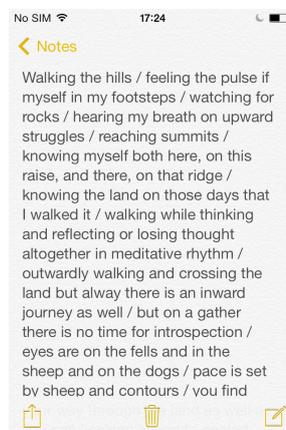
⁶⁹ Basil Bunting *Brigflatts* (Tartet: Bloodaxe, 2009), p. 42.

⁷⁰ Notes made while gathering, September 23rd 2015.

⁷¹ Notes made in Kentmere that were integrated into the poem 'Looking for Ouzels' p. 114.

⁷² Notes on a separate walk in Kentmere, also influenced the poem 'Looking for Ouzels'.

The enormous benefits of writing on a smart phone are convenience, speed, the ease of writing while walking, and the instant ability to transfer words to a computer for later refinement. The restrictions include the inclusion of typos that can occasionally be so bad that I cannot make out what I originally intended; and a very limited ability to consider form. I often use slashes in a suggestion of where I might make a line break. These marks have sometimes stayed in the final presentation of a poem (for example, '(When it's) lambing', p. 104) and have also become a feature in poems composed from the start with pencil and paper (for example, 'Marked', p. 113).



I began to get a feel for open-field poetics through playing and returning to the work of poets including Harriet Tarlo and Mark Goodwin⁷³ who both root their work in environmental observation and use wide space and staggered lines in a suggestion of fragmentation as well as physical landscape; and others including Harryette Mullen, who in her collection *Recyclopedia* (1991) explores issues of femininity and feminism and uses space as an integral part of form in a way that underpins discomfort and heightens the impact of each collection of words.

I have already alluded to Charles Olson, who coined the phrase 'open field' poetics in 1950 when he was working alongside Zukovsky and the Black Mountain poets, in his publication

⁷³ 'Rural Membrane, A Sheffield Rim, North East' in *The Ground Aslant* (2011), p. 153.

of 'Projective Verse'.⁷⁴ The Poetry Foundation considers Olson's 'Projective Verse' in this way (italics mine):

Composition by field opposes the traditional method of poetic composition based on *received* form and measure. Olson sees the challenge of the transference of poetic energy from source to poem to reader, and the way in which that energy shifts at each juncture, as particularly of concern to poets who engage in composition by field, because the poet is no longer *relying on a received structure* as a propulsive force.⁷⁵

I felt that I had found permission to experiment with form in a way that would allow the words to complete a journey they began in the field without losing the essence of their origins. There is a sense of freedom that comes through this, as well as an added power to a resulting poem, as Harriet Tarlo points out in *Jacket Magazine*:

In many ways, the subtleties of experimental poetics provide an ideal linguistic arena in which to engage in this shifting and sifting of assessing and reassessing our relationship with the places and spaces we inhabit.⁷⁶

Tarlo continues, in a reflection on her own poetry:

For me, this has indeed been the openness of a field, a moorland, cliff or hillside, those spaces in which we see human and non-human elements at work as on a canvas in the open air.⁷⁷

In some poems, I chose form that suggested patterns within the landscape (e.g. 'Borrowdale Show II', p. 56 to illustrate the alignment of sheep and pens within the show field; and 'The Raven', pp. 83-84 to suggest a distinction between land and sky).

⁷⁴ Charles Olson, 'Projective Verse', *Poetry Foundation, Essays on Poetic Theory* (2009), 1 <<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/learning/essay/237880>>.

⁷⁵ Poetry Foundation Introduction to: Charles Olson, 'Projective Verse' from *Collected Prose*, ed. by Donald Allen and Benjamin Friedlander (University of California Press, 1950). Published 13 October 2009 by the Poetry Foundation at <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/learning/essay/>. [accessed March 3 2015].

⁷⁶ Harriet Tarlo, 'Radical Landscapes: experiment and environment in contemporary poetry', in *Jacket Magazine* (2007), p.5. <<http://jacketmagazine.com/32/p-tarlo.shtml>> [accessed 3 November 2015]

⁷⁷ *ibid.*, p. 7.

In my reading of experimental poets and the use of the page as open field, I came to appreciate how much less likely this more open form of poetry is to over-sentimentalise nature, or project it as perfect. But there is also an added challenge that comes with the use of radical or open presentations, and that is to avoid an inappropriate emphasis on form.

Tarlo again:

there is a need to get beyond the obsession with linguistic experimentation per se, to transcend readings in which form is fetishised above the intertexts, ideology, politics and contexts with which the work engages.⁷⁸

In open field poetics I experience form and content as equals in affecting the story and perception of the place that is documented or evoked. Form, appearance, rhythm and lexical choice are each integral; each contributes to the presentation and linguistic embodying of a place. In her essay exploring the 'art' of writing place, author Miranda Ward considers:

The way we write about place ... And this includes the words we discard as well as the words we choose - is ripe with meaning and power.⁷⁹

Ward's observation about discarded words is relevant to my own development and critical reading of other people's work. A reader can only guess at what might have been consciously or unconsciously left out of a poem, but the impact of what is 'discard' remains. In the context of my subject and the way hill farming culture has been presented (and misrepresented and omitted) in literature about this region, this is a significant and even political point. Ward underlines the impact: '... and that power works as a force both for understanding place and for creating it.'⁸⁰ Ward is referring to words but in the consideration of form, choices about spacing on a page and the location of individual words are similarly powerful; using 'open field' poetic form in some of my poems has allowed me to represent physical spaces in landscape (e.g. *Looking for Ouzels*, p.114 and *Raven*, pp. 83-84) as well as movement (*Clouting the Twinters II*, p. 77), separation (e.g. *Boots* p. 97) and displacement or fragmentation (e.g. *long summer days* p.128)

⁷⁸ *ibid.*, p. 3.

⁷⁹ Ward, Miranda, *The Art of Writing Place*, *Geography Compass* 8/10 (2014), p. 758.

⁸⁰ Ward, p. 758.

One contemporary poet who uses open form extremely effectively without compromising the content, and has written about rural landscape and agricultural life, is Katrina Porteous. She uses non-traditional form on the page and although her poetry is almost exclusively written for the purpose of oral performance, the visual presentation remains crucial and her choice of form succeeds in strengthening the meaning and impact carried by the poem's linguistic content.

'This Far and No Further' was written by Katrina Porteous for broadcast in 2001. She had been commissioned to write about Hadrian's Wall and began her research by talking to representatives from the National Trust and National Park. 'It quickly became apparent to me,' she writes in her background to this poem, 'that, while the Roman occupation lasted less than 300 years, the land itself has been continually occupied and grazed for around 4,000 years; and it is upon that ancient livestock farming culture that this World Heritage Site still depends.'⁸¹ The similarity of her subject matter with my own is striking: the geographical location she is writing about is not the same as the one I am in, but both are steeped in a history of human culture that has evolved in response to a specific landscape, and also helped to shape it. While Porteous is writing about a place that has already been given World Heritage Site status, I am writing about a place that is being considered for this recognition.

The structure of 'This Far and No Further' places the wall at the centre, in the form of a white space that also implies its absence (just as the wall is no longer complete); flushing text to the left and right margins of the page also achieves the sense of the marginalisation of the farming community. Harriet Tarlo points out the importance of form as it shapes a 'relationship between the spatial arrangement of the poem and the landscape' and has the ability to 'open up mental spaces we don't expect'⁸² and Porteous achieves this throughout 'This Far and No Further'. For example, in the text overleaf, the wall as white space intersects the space and sits physically, as well as historically, at the heart of a peopled landscape.⁸³

⁸¹ Katrina Porteous, 'This Far and No Further' in *Two Countries* (Northumberland: Bloodaxe, 2014), p. 8.

⁸² *The Ground Aslant*, p. 9.

⁸³ *Two Countries*, p. 27.

It's a Tourist Trail,	<i>From Cowburn Rigg</i>
It's a working farm,	<i>And Cawburnshield</i>
It's a battleground,	<i>From Close-a Burns</i>
It's a place to live,	<i>And Crinkledykes,</i>
Where each man kills	<i>From Bonnyrigg</i>
The thing he loves	<i>And Beggar Bog,</i>
And Leisure's	<i>Aa' the way</i>
Where the money is.	<i>To Sooin' Shields.</i>

Porteous' use of place names in this and other poems, as is the case with Tom Rawling's work, linguistically asserts the specific location, which is then reinforced with the form. In content it offers geographical boundaries – and these boundaries are again offered by the page. Black Mountain poet, and contemporary of Olson, Robert Creeley writes about 'range':

Range implies both what there is to deal with, and the wherewithal we can bring to that activity. Range describes the world in the limits of perception. It is the "field" in the old Pythagorean sense that "terms", as John Burnet says, are boundary stones and the place they so describe the field itself.⁸⁴

Porteous could be said to be using place names as 'boundary stones' and the page as the field. Her use of place names to locate the story is complemented by her use of quotations. This is an important aspect of writing in much of my work, and the way Porteous describes it could be similarly applied to what I have done in some of my poems:

Fragments of the voices of the people who speak to me frequently end up in the poem unedited, and often provide not only the subject-matter but a formal starting-place, in the way that a spoken phrase can determine the tune of a song. So, for example, in *This Far and No Further*, one elderly lady gave me the line: 'Butter and eggs kept the house, and the wool paid the rent'. The

⁸⁴ Robert Creeley, *A Sense of Measure* (London: Calder and Boyars Ltd., 1972), p27.

ballad-like rhythm of this direct quotation determined the musical shape of that particular section of the poem.⁸⁵

I was keen to provide a collection of poems that worked alongside journal entries to illustrate my experience of the hill farming year, and I found myself driven to write in a number of forms: some traditional and uniform, some open field, and then to add to the work on the page by creating a poem with a larger field and a greater sense of movement. This led me to experiment with ways to present a finished poem in the place where it started. In doing this, I would be sourcing a poem from a peopled landscape and returning it to the same landscape and community. And because neither land nor living people are ever static, I wanted to include movement within the poems. There is a similarity with Katrina Porteous' desire to bring music into her work:

They have their own music, places, and I'm listening for that music. And because my instrument is words – I don't play any instrument – I'm trying to translate that place into words. I want to recreate the music of that place.⁸⁶

I comment on her methodology here because where one of her main driving forces, as a poet writing primarily for oral performance and radio, is to 'recreate the music of [a] place,' one of mine is to recreate the movement and practical actions of a particular culture and place. I have aimed to do this with form in the way that I present poems on the page, but have also taken it one step further with kinetic poetry, bringing physical movement into the life of the poem, from its conception to its initial presentation and then beyond this as it enters the broader arena of the landscape. It arises, it is expressed, and it is returned. This is one of several methods of Open Fell Poetics and is the most direct, in the physical intervention of text within landscape.

My first experimentation with Open Fell Poetics came with the addition of a poem, word by word, to the back end of sheep. The poem was added to cloths or 'clouts' that are stitched

⁸⁵ Joe Smith, interview with Katrina Porteous, *The Clearing*, September 4 2015, <http://theclearingonline.org/2015/09/an-interview-with-katrina-porteous/> [accessed 4 October 2016].

⁸⁶ Katrina Porteous on *The Listeners*, BBC Radio 4, 30 December 2015, 3.30pm (extracts used in *The Listeners* were taken from: *Dunstanburgh Castle; a secret as old as the stones*, produced by Julian May. First broadcast BBC Radio 4, 09/2/2004)

over the tail end of young ewes (twinters) when a farmer wants to guard them from becoming pregnant. This is an ancient and now relatively rare practice. I describe the practice in more detail in the almanac (pp. 71-78), and my own involvement in it. Thus within the almanac of a farmer's year my own poetic development has found a place. There has been an interweaving.

'Clouting the Twinters' began with the gathering of ideas outside in the Cumbrian fells. In 2012 I had been welcomed in by a farmer who still clouts his ewes, and was given the enormous privilege of clouting a sheep myself. I had felt the strength and weight of the sheep lying between my legs, the toughness and coarseness of wool on my hands, the oiliness of lanolin on my skin, and the force of needle through cloth. With all of these came a sense of tradition passed down the centuries. I had witnessed the up-close smell of a rain-wet sheep, the muffled sounds of a barn with thirty sheep shuffling and braying in the corner. The experience was visceral and held a story I wanted to convey. The addition of a poem on the clouts seemed the ideal way to do this.

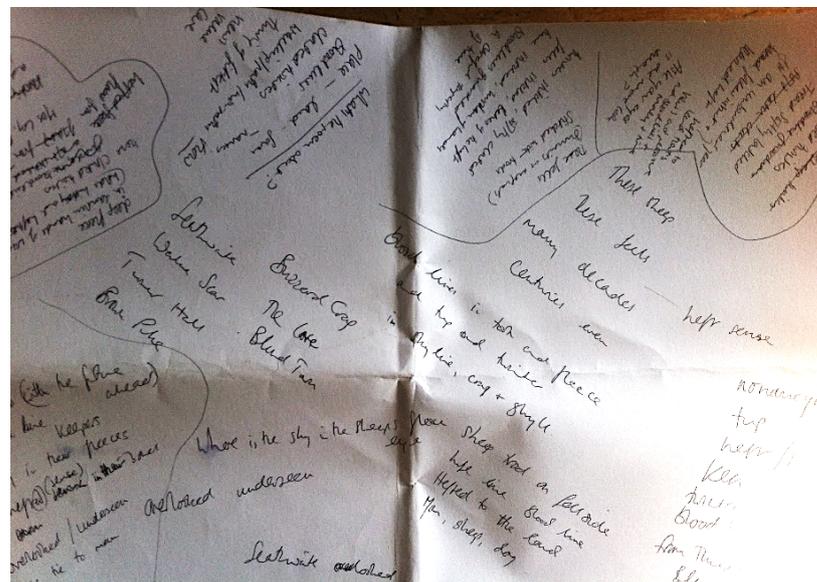
The composition began with the material on which I would be writing. I was given 20 clouts, or cloths, as my canvas. In this way, the design of the overall poem had a huge influence on the content. The process reminded me of Basil Bunting's revelation of his process when writing *Brigflatts* (which was first performed in 1965): 'It's finding the actual building materials to suit the architect's design, not designing the building to suit the materials that happen to be lying around.'⁸⁷ I was given the design, in the presentation of the 20 clouts of a particular size, and I had a starting point - the idea of stitching - that allowed the composition to begin.

My choice to stitch words onto sheep using the medium of the clouts was a way to produce poetry that would physically act out the story it told and involve the participation of farmer, sheep and land. It would reinforce, through a practice used every year, the way farming wisdom is stitched into flock and land. The clouts allowed me to create embodied poetry that was part of the subject about which it spoke, and was also active, reactive and unpredictably influenced by that very subject.

⁸⁷ *Brigflatts*, p. 77.

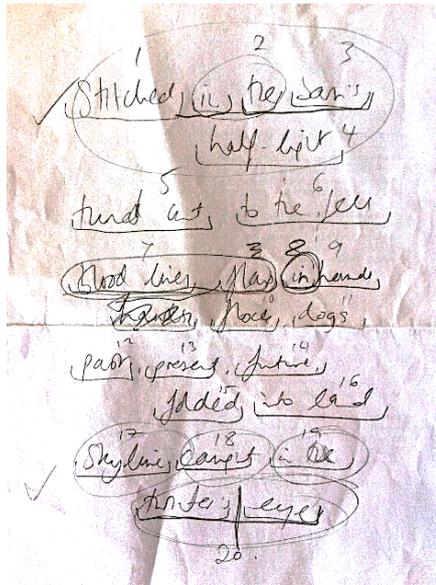
My search for the right words began in the farmyard and on the fells around the barn where the sheep would be clouted. The next stage was to scatter words in the representational landscape: I used a roll of white wallpaper several metres long so that my space would be unrestricted, much like the fells across which this poem would roam once the sheep were carrying it. I wanted to include the act of stitching and encompass the idea of the open and undulating unfenced landscape of the high fells as well as the depth of time and the cycles of activity that take place here. I needed the words to convey the idea of belonging, both for the people and the sheep; I wanted a sense of movement as well as a sense of being held in place; a suggestion of the environment; and of a human culture which encompasses skill and intuition, head and heart, present and past.

I also wanted to incorporate the unique language of the fells through local dialect. I chose to use the word 'twinter' (the term for a sheep that has seen two winters). This word is part of a local lexicon that reveals this 'taskscape' where words are indicative of working practice.



As I worked on a shorter poem I treated the words as individual elements as well as components of the whole. Rhythm, and the potential for individual sections to work on their own, became very important; but the 'design' was also a driving force for this poem because the number of letters in each word was limited by the size of the clouts.

⁸⁸ 'Clouting the Twinters', early composition ideas on a sheet of wallpaper. Image by Harriet Fraser, 10 November 2015.



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From its creation to its various forms of expression this poem carried the influence of factors outside of my control – this was a fitting reflection of farming life where, despite the cyclic nature of tasks and seasons, day-to-day events including weather and health, are always unpredictable. The need to be flexible and to adapt, and the inevitability of change, is at the foundation of successful, resilient farming. But the challenge of writing a piece that would work in different formats was considerable.

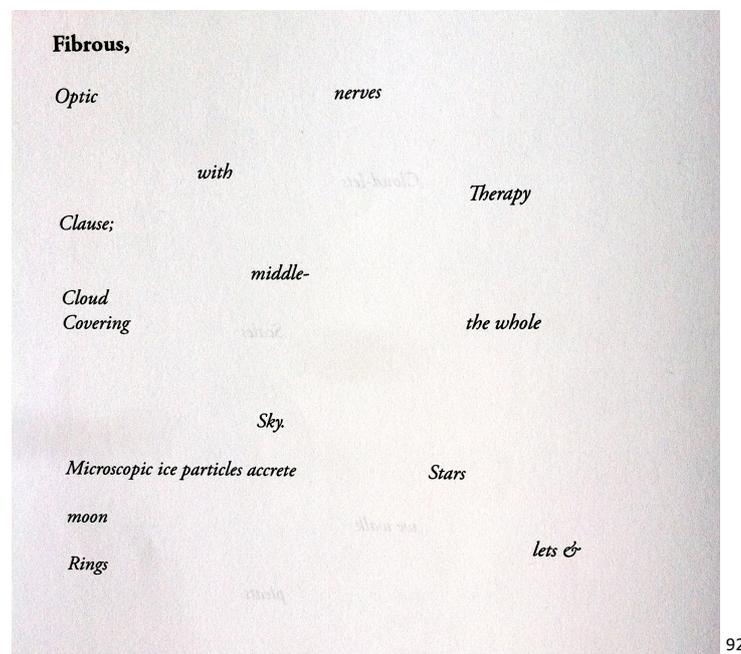
In keeping the poem short, and despite the fact that it would become fragmented, I wanted it to maintain its own integrity. In other words, I wanted to avoid a sense of destruction. I was aware that the spaces between the words would widen when the sheep were out on the hills instead of the words of the poem taking precedence, the spaces would become dominant. While this might have led to destabilisation (and could be taken as a metaphor for an unstable culture) this was not my intention. My intention was for the poem to be enriched by its symbiotic relationship with the land into which it had been dispersed, in mimicry of the behaviour of the sheep, and, in a wider context, as a reflection of the place and the people who have inhabited the land for centuries but physically take up a tiny portion of it.

⁸⁹ Image of process: Harriet Fraser, 20 November 2015.

⁹⁰ Image of words being added to the clouts: Harriet Fraser. 2 December 2015.

The words of the Artist Placement Group (APG) in London come to mind. The group, initiated by Barbara Steveni and John Latham in 1966, placed artists within industrial or business organisations, allowing art to result from the experience. The observation that ‘the context is half the work’⁹¹ became the maxim of the APG and went on to influence public art across the UK. The statement rings true in relation to poetry that is allowed to be kinetic and responsive to its environment and in this case, with the clouting poem, I consider the context to be more like 90% of the work. It was a living poem whose page-bound form is like a small memory of its actual essence.

My concerns that the poem would not suffer destruction in the face of fragmentation grew partially from my overarching intention that the poem would maintain integrity throughout the process, and partly from my reaction to fragmentation in some writings of other radical poets. I have in mind Mark Dickinson’s poem ‘Fibrous’ which is one of a number of poems featured in Harriet Tarlo’s collection of radical poetry, *The Ground Aslant*. In this poem, words are widely spaced and fragmented:

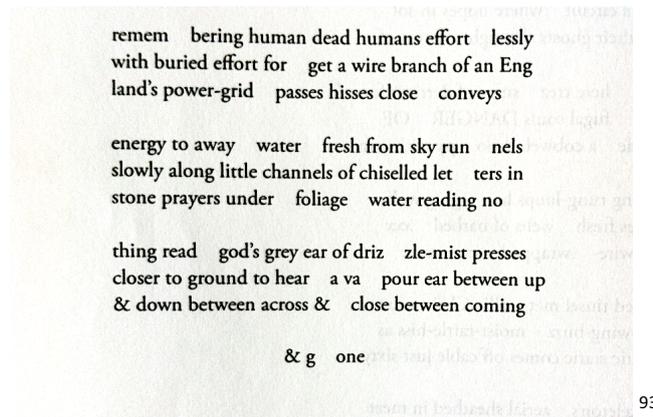


⁹¹ Peter Eleey, ‘Context is half the work’, *Frieze*, 111 (November–December 2007).

⁹² Mark Dickinson, ‘Fibrous’ in *The Ground Aslant*, p.172. (Image © Harriet Fraser).

For me the form and apparently illogical punctuation present more ground for confusion than comprehension, and without the wider context leave us with a sense of fragility, uncertainty, loss and incompleteness.

Another example of fragmentation that carries with it a sense of destruction is Mark Goodwin's 'Rurban Membrane, A Sheffield Rim, North East' where sense is gradually lost as the poem reaches its end and becomes ever more broken:



In Goodwin's poem, from the title to the closing part-word, there is a cleverness, or to put it another way, a conscious intentionality to the breaking up of the words that comes from the poet himself. My intention was to allow the poem to break up and flow in a way that was not within my control. I was clear about where the poem started; but I did not have an attachment to how it might end up after it had been released into the environment.

It was important to me that my intervention would interfere as little as possible with the ordinary practice of the hill farmer: I would be the person to add words to twenty clouts but these clouts would be stitched onto sheep during the normal process of clouting, thus demanding no artificial work from the farmer. Adding words onto the sheep would become an extraordinary act within an ordinary cycle of farming practice.

⁹³ *The Ground Aslant*, p.154. (Image © Harriet Fraser).

The process of attaching the poem to the sheep began with material. I was given clouts of a brown and grey material. To add the words, I chose an old white T-shirt, cut it into oblongs, and stitched each oblong onto a clout using waxed black thread (the thread needed to be weather proof, and cotton thread would have disintegrated in the winter weather). The white cloth surfaces became the page for the poem.



The stitching process took a long time. It also carried some significance in its physical re-enactment of the way in which much of the most widely-read poetry and prose about the Lake District omits an accurate portrayal of shepherds as inherent elements of place; partial truths have been neatly stitched together, hiding fuller stories. Such stitching-over, persisting through time until the scar can barely be noticed, allows a cloak of *misperception*; it idealises a location and an experience; it protects an often Romantic view that enforces an oversight of something that is critical to the whole – in this case the missing element is the hill farmers' world.

Symbolically, then, the physical stitching of words onto sheep might be seen as a way of stitching hidden stories back into the literature of the land. Using cloth, needle and thread as crucial elements of the poem's expression also takes a literal meaning into the physical realm. The word 'text' has its roots in the Latin verb 'texere' which means 'to weave, to join, fit together, braid, interweave, construct, fabricate, build'.⁹⁵

After I had released the poem 'Clouting the Twinters' onto the sheep, I became aware of the poet Valerie Laws, who in 2001 had used sheep to carry words that spelt out a poem but were rearranged randomly depending on the sheep's movements. Valerie Laws was

⁹⁴ Image, Harriet Fraser, 1 December 2015.

⁹⁵ The Online Dictionary of Etymology <http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=text> [accessed 4 January 2016].

interested in the way that sheep could display some of the characteristics of quantum theory, randomly coinciding and reordering words so that sometimes they made sense and sometimes they did not.⁹⁶ She used spray paint to write individual words on the sheep, drawing her initial inspiration from the movement of sheep marked with colours, and the way the movement of sheep and clouds seemed to reflect one another. She discusses this focus on quantum theory here:

Quantum Sheep celebrates three main principles of Quantum Theory. Randomness, which is at the heart of the universe (the 14 sheep move randomly to create over 80 billion poems): duality (the metaphorical duality of clouds and sheep): and the influence of the observer on the observed (the onlookers making sense of the formation, creating their own versions of the poems with punctuation & line-breaks).⁹⁷

My own sheep would be less closely observed because of their wide dispersal and the land's topography. My intention was not merely to initiate an unpredictable re-ordering of a poem; rather the primary driving force for my 'sheep poetry' was to allow the poem to re-enter the land and the practices of sheep husbandry on that land. I was less interested about the random nature of reordering, and more interested in the experimental and physical act of placing a poem into the landscape in a way that emphasises space and movement. The passing of the physical poem through the hands of farmers was an allusion to the concept of the Lake District landscape being a hand-made landscape, crafted by the practices of the farmers.

Nevertheless, the urge to observe the poem as it moved was strong and did become part of the process. That the sheep, once on the open fell, were never actually seen by myself or other humans, as far as I know, is representative of the actual practice of grazing on open commons and metaphorically suggestive of the relative invisibility of a culture within that landscape. Their final reassembling at the end of the winter period, back in the yard of the farm, presented an opportunity to read the poem once more, in the order in which the sheep presented it. This was a physical demonstration of what Olson suggests happens to a poem once a poet allows it to find existence in 'the field': 'From the moment he ventures

⁹⁶ Valerie Laws, <http://www.valerielaws.com> [accessed 20 February 2016].

⁹⁷ <<http://www.valerielaws.com/quantum-sheep---the-science-bit.html>>. [accessed 20 February 2016].

into FIELD COMPOSITION - puts himself in the open - he can go by no track other than the one the poem under hand declares, for itself.'⁹⁸

The excitement of watching a poem declaring its own expression, with the influence of movement, led me to conduct two more experiments. In the first, I spoke to farmers about what they cultivate in the sheep they enter into shows, and recorded their words in note form. These became the raw material for a poem that I spread across four rosettes that were presented to the champions of an annual sheep show (Bloodlines, pp. 131-138). The rosettes, after presentation, were taken to separate farms so that, in its current resting place, the poem contains the landscape between its lines. As with 'Clouting the Twinters', the poem for rosettes (pp. 137-138) has passed through the hands of farmers and been in contact with their sheep, and has found a new form and a new expression within the local landscape. I had built on the concept of source, presentation and dispersal that I developed in the work with the clouds.

The third experiment was to form a poem drawing on conversations with women in farming families about life in the kitchen, and then to write this poem onto a cake to be shared at a show. In the conversations, it became clear that the kitchen was viewed as the heart of the house and I wanted the poem to reflect this: the kitchen as the centre of domestic and farming life. This isn't the case on every farm but for the majority, indoor life revolves around the kitchen: the place for cooking, eating, paper work, the bringing up of children, homework, nurturing of lambs, the hanging of rosettes, welcoming guests, drying washing and many other tasks that are an integral part of life on a farm.

The arena for the poem was a cake but in order to fit onto the cake the original poem would need to be fragmented and reduced. My plan was to add the cake to the refreshments table at a show, where it would be eaten by farmers (Poem for a Cake, p.134). Building on the device used with 'Clouting the Twinters' I drew on a traditional, 'normal' activity - that of providing cakes to eat at a public event, and the almost daily tradition of making cakes on a farm - and used this as a platform for returning words sourced from the farmers. In the case

⁹⁸ 'Projective Verse' (1950).

of the cake, the poem's dispersal was complete and the return of the words into the mouths of those who spoke them was entirely literal.

The kinetic 'open-fell' poems have been a dynamic part of my writing and a complement to the journaling of the farming year and the more traditional on-the-page poems that arose from my experiences with farmers. The kinetic poems offer a departure from the expected form of a collection documenting 'a year of farming' and have arisen from a process of collaboration between myself and the farmers, and as a result of my own developing practice: finding my way in my writing practice at the same time as I have been finding my way in the landscape and lives of upland farmers. It has allowed me to come to a place where language, practice, and landscape have become intertwined. The open fell poetics has offered a space where human language and the language of landscape speak together, much as Norman Nicholson says in 'To The River Duddon':

... that eternity flows in a mountain beck –
The long cord of the water, the shepherd's numerals
That run upstream, through the singing decades of dialect.⁹⁹

Although the open-fell poems have made up for a small proportion of the collection of poetry, the process of composing them, preparing the material and physically placing them has taken a far greater proportion of time. The context *is* a huge part of the poem. They are, however, to be taken as a part of the overall work rather than its main outcome.

The work that follows is intended as an introduction to hill farming in Cumbria, with events rooted in place and time. It offers a reflection on the constancy of certain elements (seasons, practices wed to seasons, and knowledge handed down) and the unpredictability of each and every day, when events are affected by weather, above all, but also by prices, policies, and personal family situations. My intention is to give a sensation of a cyclic way of life, together with observations of particular moments, experiences and sensations in a continually unfolding present.

⁹⁹ Norman Nicholson, *Selected Poems 1940-1982* (London: Faber and Faber Ltd, 1982), p. 14.

My practice is grounded in the act of making notes while in the field; my notes form the original raw material for the almanac entries as well as for the poems. The use of prose as well as poetry is not a translation from one to the other; rather the two forms are distinct and arise from different original notes, even when these notes were made on the same day. The methodology of 'Open Fell Poetics' drives this complementary blend. The prosaic form of the almanac allows farmers' voices to drive the narrative and at the same time evokes a fellowship, documenting the farming year as well as our developing relationship. I have italicized quotations in the journal entries and in poems, and in the journal have chosen to centralise them to give them prominence, emphasising again the centrality of farmers in the landscape.

Alongside the prose, poetry allows for experimentation with form and space, and addresses, often in fine detail, specific moments. The marriage of prose and poetry reflects the co-existence of land and people; the conjunction of practical farming tasks that demand acute attention with the beauty of the broader landscape. It also reflects, through style, the parallel evolution of the farming year and my own emergent poetic practice. The combination of documentation and poetic expression, and the developing relationship between myself and the farmers, converge in the presentation of poems on the rosettes and cake, when I am asked to write for the champion rosettes and the cake is made by a farmer. There is a shared intention and a cooperation between us, and an evolving relationship within an evolving space. The coming together of two literary forms, and the appearance of poetry beyond the page, reflect this.

The poetry that accompanies my almanac does not exclusively catalogue farming tasks. I have chosen to include poems about the landscape and birds (such as 'Browns', p.69; 'Heron', p.70). My choice is based on the conversations I have had with farmers about these elements; I have been guided to particular places (as was the case with 'Mungrisedale Oaks', p. 96) and I have been alerted to the presence of particular habitats or animals (for example, being told about the nesting place of ring ouzels high in the Kentmere Valley: 'Ring Ouzels', p. 114). These poems have enabled me to extend the narrative of the year beyond the single event that has been the focus of each almanac prose entry, and extend the coverage of the landscape that is the farmers' territory.

The variety of form in the poetry has arisen organically during the process of field work. I knew at an early stage that the richness in this landscape and the hill-farming culture could not be accounted for using one form alone. Poems that follow a traditional placement of lines flushed to the left margin (which Olson might describe as 'received form and measure') reflect the element of farming that follows in a received tradition - the form of the year through the seasons and the repetition of successful practices. Where form becomes fragmented and I have used the page as a field, this reflects the way that day-to-day experiences are determined by the force of current events, which could range from weather to finances (for Olson, this would be the 'propulsive force'). Finally, the kinetic 'Open Fell' poems allow the poems to recreate their form, in a reflection of a dynamic landscape and the continual need for farmers to experiment and adapt in order to thrive.

The title I have chosen for the almanac and poetry collection is 'Bloodlines'. This word is uttered time and time again by upland farmers whose foremost consideration is the continuation of strong genes in their flocks. In Cumbria, where 95% of the world's Herdwick sheep are concentrated in exposed and weather-beaten locations, the success of the sheep depends on qualities that are passed from generation to generation; keeping bloodlines strong is essential. Some people might say that the continuation of bloodlines in humans is equally significant. As an extension of this, one could say that the passing down of poetic practices carries its own, albeit literary, bloodlines, where some tenets persist, and cross-breeding allows for the appearance of new work that is rooted in past traditions.

This thesis is in no way meant to offer an exhaustive discourse on hill farming in Cumbria. It is simply a witnessing, and a documentation of my own creative practice within the context of farming. It is not meant to convey any particular meaning or point to any one issue (for example as in Drury & Syrad's *Exchange* (2015), which takes the subject of organic farming as its central theme). Its aim is simply to present a poetic experimentation and highlight the value of the hill farming culture for its own sake, alive and in a constantly evolving relationship with land and livestock: a culture that is rooted in hundreds, if not thousands, of years of learning and practice.

some words that might not be familiar

<i>Angus</i>	a breed of cattle commonly used for beef production
<i>bloodline</i>	the ancestral and genetic connection between generations; in sheep, ensuring bloodlines are kept strong assists continuation of a strong breed and careful selection of bloodlines encourages the continuation of certain characteristics
<i>Cheviot</i>	a breed of hill sheep (white faced) taking its name from the Cheviot Hills in the Scottish borders
<i>clip (clipping)</i>	to clip a sheep is to remove its fleece; all farmers have hand clippers for removing excess wool around the tail end, or clipping a small amount of sheep that were missed in the summer or need their fleece removed early, but at clipping time most flocks are clipped, or sheared, using electrical equipment
<i>clout</i>	a cloth stitched over the back end of a ewe to protect against penetration from a ram (origins Norse and Old English)
<i>common</i>	land owned collectively by a number of people or organisations, or a single person or organisation, on which a number of people (commoners / graziers) have traditional rights to graze their livestock
<i>draft ewes</i>	female sheep that are too old to thrive in the uplands and are sold on (drafted out) for lowland grazing and breeding
<i>ewe</i>	female sheep
<i>fat lambs</i>	lambs selected for slaughter
<i>fell</i>	hill, upland area
<i>fell wall</i>	the last wall separating enclosed grazing areas from the unfenced common land on the fell
<i>gather</i>	sheep are brought down from the fells on a 'gather'; also used as a verb, to gather
<i>geld/gelt</i>	a ewe that is 'empty' or does not become pregnant in the tugging season
<i>ghyll / gill</i>	a steep narrow gorge, typically containing a narrow stream; a narrow stream
<i>gimmer</i>	a female sheep before she has had a lamb
<i>guinea</i>	the currency used in the livestock auction (the guinea was a gold coin in use in Britain until the early nineteenth century); one guinea = one pound and five pence

<i>heaf</i>	see <i>heft</i>
<i>heft</i>	the most common word describing a sheep's knowledge of its grazing land, including the best places to shelter when the weather turns. Knowledge of the heft is passed from ewe to lamb. On common land where there is no fencing, individual flocks or groups of sheep keep to their own hefts, one flock buffering up against another. Herdwicks are renowned for their hefting ability (and many farms, including all National Trust farms, maintain the same hefted flock when the farm passes to a new owner or tenant). The term is also used for people that feel hefted to the land.
<i>Herdwick</i>	the breed of sheep most suited to the Lake District fells (where up to 95% of all Herdwicks live); the word comes from the Old Norse <i>herdvyck</i> meaning 'sheep pasture' and it is commonly believed that Herdwick sheep had been introduced by Norse settlers by the 12 th century
<i>hogg</i>	a sheep aged between 9 and 18 months, until it cuts two teeth; Herdwick hogs are dark brown in colour
<i>inbye</i>	the land closest to the farm, typically the best pasture
<i>intake/intack</i>	enclosed land between the inbye and the fell
<i>ken</i>	to ken the sheep is to know them, their environment, their heft, and their behaviour; someone who kens the sheep well is likely to know the age, lineage and heft of any one sheep in a flock of up to 1000
<i>Luing</i>	Scottish beef cattle (pronounced <i>ling</i>)
<i>pet lamb</i>	a lamb whose mother has died, or which has been unable to suckle at its mother (or another ewe) so is bottle-fed and may be nurtured in the kitchen
<i>race</i>	a parallel set of metal barriers aligned to allow a single sheep to pass through at any one time (used during sorting, dosing, shearing etc.)
<i>raddle/reddle</i>	a paste used to mark up a tup (ram) on the chest so that he marks the ewes he mounts; originally red but different colours are used to mark the different dates of insemination
<i>Rough Fell</i>	a breed of sheep common on the eastern edge of the Lake District
<i>schemes</i>	agreements such as the Higher Level Stewardship scheme whereby farmers receive money and agree to specific stocking levels and environmental activities including tree planting and the upkeep of walls
<i>shearling</i>	a sheep that has had one shear, and is two years' old
<i>shippon</i>	a low-roofed shed, originally a cattle shed
<i>smit, smit mark</i>	a smit mark is a coloured mark applied to a sheep to identify the flock; to apply the mark is to smit, and the mark is known as a smit

<i>Swaledale</i>	an upland breed of sheep originating in Swaledale, Yorkshire
<i>tip</i>	another word for a tup (ram); also the verb to tip (inseminate)
<i>tup</i>	a ram or male sheep; mating is called tugging
<i>twinter</i>	a sheep that has seen two winters
<i>two-shear</i>	a sheep that has had two shears (also three-shear, four-shear etc.)
<i>wall gap</i>	a section of stone wall that has fallen
<i>wether</i>	a castrated male sheep
<i>wintering</i>	sheep are wintered in certain areas of a farm's land; hogs are typically off-wintered or sent away to richer pastures to be fattened up, and under some schemes where sheep must be taken off the commons over winter, older sheep will be off-wintered as well
<i>yow</i>	a female sheep (ewe)

Bloodlines

Borrowdale Show I

Wet.

It's traditional: this show, this rain.

Farmers hunched against the wet
rivalry and friendship hand in glove,
heads down, tups held firm.

Raindrops fall from noses,
knuckled grip on horns, bone on bone.

Raddled rams shake off rain
a spray of red
and the scent of fell:
heady, musty, masculine.

A world within a world.

Turn back the clock two hundred years:
same space, same faces, same passion.

Some call it heritage, some call it culture,
some call it fell farming.

Borowdale Show II

Clouds press fells	cocoon the valley
Wet wool wet grass	wet sky
Farmers in line Touch of fingers grace	hold tups still in a cupped hand
Weather hewn knuckles	curl on herdwick horns
Names repeated	through centuries like the call of rooks in trees
Wait for the judge's choice	

sales

October

*It's the most important time in the farming calendar.
If we get it wrong now,
nothing else works out eh.*



The air is clear from rain departed and there's a hint of blue between the clouds. I walk towards the mart through the scent of lanolin, sheep shit, wet tweed and bacon butties.

Herdwicks are being let out of the back of Land Rovers and trailers. There's a clatter of hooves and the sheep, two or three at a time, charge with determination, heads down. We instantly stop our conversations and herd them collectively – our legs apart and arms spread wide, with open hands and palms facing forwards. There's a chorus of soft hollers, whistles and shushes and the sheep are filtered into the waiting pens. Conversations resume.

The Broughton Tup Sale is held on the last Tuesday of September, the first of a string of sales that continues through October. It marks the starting point of the hill farmers' year and I've chosen to come because I like its intimacy, and it's the first sale of tups: the first of several chances that farmers have to make decisions that will affect their year ahead. It's a small auction mart with little more than fifty pens, and a tiny yard for showing the sheep before the auctioning begins. This sale is attended by most of the farmers who have a Herdwick flock in Cumbria, and there is a small collection of Swaledale rams as well. The market has a corrugated roof, the toilet is an outside shack, and the showing and selling of sheep here has been done in much the same way for centuries.

The programme is a roll-call of family names. I trace the list: D&G Bland, WG Wilkinson, J Bland, SJ Richardson, A Hartley, B Dickinson & Co, K Wrathall, M Potter, JW Relph, S Hardisty & Son, IM Benson.

Some newer names have settled into place, like self-seeded birch established in land left empty, but most have been uttered in connection with particular farms and fells for many generations. There's a strong bloodline running through these families: sons and daughters learning from their parents and grandparents, and passing on their knowledge to their own children.

Here today, it's the bloodlines of the tups that matters. The programme shows the sire of each tup, but many of the farmers here will already know the story behind individual sheep and the reputation of individual flocks and farmers. I'm drawn into conversations and enter a world where the family trees of sheep map themselves out like paths over the fells, linking one to the other across space and time. What's crucial is that each farmer introduces a new bloodline to the flock on a regular basis, both to avoid a tup being put to its own relatives, and to build resilience. With 95% of all Herdwick sheep confined to the Lake District fells, and only a couple of hundred registered flocks, managing genetic diversity is important.

Decisions to buy are driven by a combination of factors: age, quality and performance, lineage and price, and personal preferences about the way a Herdwick 'should' look, the type of terrain and weather it will be exposed to, and whether the farmer wants to breed more strong tups, or is set on breeding a strong stock of ewes.

You need good legs, one in each corner. A good colour, not too white, not too grey. A good pair of testicles.

Men and women are leaning up against the metal railings and talking in low voices. To get a closer look, some farmers step into the pens and sink their hands into fleeces, hold a mouth to curl its edges up and inspect the teeth, or bend down to feel low-slung

testicles. The tups, each weighing forty or more kilos, tend to stand calm, but some bash the ground with their hooves or lower their hard, horned, heads, threatening; the farmers are used to this, and avoid injury.

In the yard, each sheep that has been entered for judging is held with its chin cupped in a quiet practiced palm - older farmers who've been coming to this sale for fifty years or more, and a few young farmers, many being watched by their fathers, mothers or grandfathers. Women are outnumbered by men, but some of the women who are showing here are among the most respected farmers. Behind them, a wall coated in burnished leaves of Virginia creeper springs to life each time the sun breaks through the clouds.

A good mouth. You don't want them having long teeth and a broken mouth. It's alright for the wethers but it's the gimmers.

While they're in line, the farmers smooth hairs on the back of a neck, or adjust the leg position; eyes are on the judges but it's a friendly gathering and there's playful banter between them.

I stand crammed into the small crowd. I can't say I know what I am looking for but there are plenty of people here to tell me what's good – or less than good – about each sheep. And I am told the important facts: where a tup was sired, which sheep it has sired, where it won prizes in the summer. Each one of these tups may be put to as many as sixty ewes, but their true value won't become apparent until the lambs come in April.

Problem is, everyone will be nodding for the good uns. You'll have to dig deep in them pockets eh.

No-one is hesitant in talking to me, but I don't find many who will share their buying intentions openly. I have to wait until we're in the auction room together and the bidding begins. The first lot of tups to go into the ring are selected by drawing a number out of a hat. They belong to the Benson family at Harry Place Farm. Forty-four other lots will follow them.

We're packed in close. Some people sit on benches, others stand on the concrete steps that rise in three tiers or stand pressed against the railings around the ring. This is where I am, leaning in between men and women in hats and waterproof jackets. Weathered hands clutch programmes and all eyes are on the sheep. The enclosed space is thick with chatter and the ceaseless calling of the auctioneer made metallic by the PA.

The ring is strewn with sawdust, kicked up by the feet of each tup as it is coaxed to move by a farmer, arms and legs wide, hands facing forward, in the typical stance of a sheep-herder. As each new tup is ushered in, the owner tells the auctioneer something about it: its strength, its lineage, the prizes it has won, the champions it has sired. The auctioneer weaves this information into his breathless stream of numbers as he looks for a starting price and then, if there is interest, calls out the rising bids.

Look at the power there boys, that's a right tup! What a front end! Gave one of the best yows he's got.

The auctioneer responds to eyebrow-raises, nods and finger-twitches but as hard as I try I don't spot a single indication of a bid. He holds his left hand in mid-air, like a conductor, as if to track bids or draw them out, while his right is tight around the gavel, ready to hammer it down when the sale is decided.

I'm wary of making any bid-like movements but suspect that this auctioneer knows everyone in the room and is unlikely to think I'm buying. I watch the tups and I'm pulled into a kind of stillness by the intensity in a hundred gazes – some on the tup that they want to have for their own flock, some on the other faces to gauge the interest. The smell of sheep is rising from the bodies around me, from legs and hands that have held and brushed against the broad-backs of these animals in the pens.

The room quietens each time the bidding price rises. Some rounds of bidding send the crowd into stillness, and tension settles in the warming air above our heads, its presence as much a part of the building as the cobwebs in its high corners. Other sheep receive less interest. The auctioneer scans the room and repeats the virtue of the tup but if the reserve price of eighty guineas is not met, the sheep will return to the farm. Most tups go for between one and four hundred guineas, but there's a huge range. The highest price today is four thousand eight hundred: a Turner Hall tup, homebred, and much sought after. The progeny of a Turner Hall tup is likely to produce good lambs and fetch good prices in the future.

A butterfly catches the light. It has been flying up to the skylights, rising, then dipping, for the last half hour. On the sawdust circle beneath, a middle-aged farmer in jeans and a grey jumper steps towards the auctioneer to introduce his third tup. He tilts his head up to the block.

Three year old again, same way bred.

His attention turns back to his tup as he encourages it to move around the ring. Despite the auctioneer's hard sell it only just reaches eighty guineas. The farmer raises his eyebrows and gives a shrug. The next tup that comes into the ring fetches a slightly higher price at one hundred guineas but none of this batch of ten tups goes for more than a hundred and twenty. His better ones, he tells me, are on reserve for Cockermonth sale at the weekend.

Broughton Tup Sales

heat breath wool
 I am woven in
 eyes conversations
 pull the air in close

I am penned in
 stilled to breathless
 with a hundred others
 as the bidding
rises

this tup a favourite
rises

a good mouth
rises

a leg in each corner
rises

Turner Hall lineage
rises to the thousands

landless flockless
 off-comer I
 let in
 woolscent
 fellvowels

around me
 lines of land
 etched into faces

Under the Hammer

one double eight two, two two bid, two fifty, two fifty
 very good tup just doesn't have a wife for it yet
 three three three bid, three fifty fifty, three fifty bid
 four four four bid, four fifty, OK at four hundred fifty
 four fifty bid, at four fifty four, four four four
 fifty five n five double o, five hundred bid
 helluva mouth on that tup he says
 five five five fifty, six hundred bid, six bid six double o
 six six hundred pound, six fifty at six fifty, six five zero bid
 at six fifty bid we've riched six fifty, six fifty

four year old, Glenn Wilk: six nineteen
 now - born here two year ago
 work for it this time eh
 four hundred, three, two hundred
 two hundred fifty bid, fifty bid, fifty pair, fifty bid
 eighty eighty bid, hundred one double oh bid
 one hundred bid, twenty twenty, one hundred n twenty
 at one twenty one hundred, one hundred twenty
 one hundred twenty bid
 same way bred as the last
 one hundred twenty, one hundred twenty bid
 last chance
 one fifty bid, one eight one eighty bid
 one more ull do it
 one hundred n eighty, one hundred n eighty bid
 last chance one hundred eighty
 going o sother n eh, one hundred n eighty
 got well he says, that ull give you some right uns he says
 one eight two hundred and two bid
 two bid, two hundred, two bid two hundred pound bid
 two two hundred bid two hundred
 gone

Bloodlines

deep pockets, high hopes

in their veins:

land, hands, care, rain

wind, skill, secrets

tupping

November

*You'll not find a farmer who wants to
leave the farm during tupping time.*



Grey winter sky. We speed along the track on the quad bike, Anthony with his hands on the controls, me perched behind him. I grip the cold metal grille with one hand and let my legs rest beside Anthony, with one foot steadying me. We're dressed head-to-toe in waterproofs but the day's not bad - as good as you'd expect for this time of year. Here in the flat inbyes in the valley's broad bed, fields are separated by stone walls and fences. These are the best grazing grounds, used for tupping and for lambing, and we're heading to the top field where he has put his best tup with around fifty ewes.

Anthony Hartley is one of the most highly respected Herdwick breeders in Cumbria. His name is often spoken with tones of respect, along with a small number of others, including Jean Wilson, who's playfully referred to as today's Beatrix Potter. A strong flock, though, doesn't just happen. It stems from care and attention throughout the year, and from year to year, and the ability to 'ken' your sheep – know them and their behavior so closely that almost without thinking you know what they need. But starting with good breeding is vital and each November, the planning starts. With over a thousand ewes, Anthony needs around twenty tups. He's precise in his matching. It's not only about keeping a strong and clean blood line, it's also about the type of animal you want to achieve. He explains it to me:

Well, you have to choose which ewes to put to which tups. No good putting all the best ewes to all your best tups and leaving the poorer quality ewes to go with the weaker tups. You'll match the less good ewes with a stronger tup if you want to improve their quality.

Are you breeding ewes or tups? Do you want to breed lambs for market, or for future breeding?

Anthony's main focus is on breeding ewes, and to a smaller degree, breeding good tups. His efforts, he tells me, are not driven towards producing big lambs whose weight will fetch a lot of money in the market.

The tup we're going to see now is being paired with Turner Hall's champion ewes. He's Anthony's favourite, a tup bred here on the farm, son of a ewe that won every show she was entered in. Now six years old, he may have two or three years of breeding left in him.

Like all the tups, this one needs to be marked so that Anthony can tell when a ewe has been tipped. The marking is done with a thick raddle, a coloured paste that needs to be reapplied to the chest every two to three days. When the tup mounts a ewe, he will leave a spread of colour on her rump.

Anthony calls to his dog, Moss, who dashes around the edge of the huddle of ewes, driving the tup away from them and back towards Anthony. He's ready, legs wide, arms wide, and moves in to grab the tup as it comes towards him. Its fleece hangs on its chest like a mane. Its broad nose runs into a hard thick head framed by enormous horns. It must be over fifty kilos in weight. Anthony digs deep for all his strength and rolls the sheep onto its haunches so that it is sitting up, its belly facing me. Two wool covered testicles, each the size of a bag of sugar, hang low. It's a king momentarily subdued.

Of course the tups get the habit, they know what you're going to do, so they run around the outside of the sheep so you can't catch 'em.

Anthony and the sheep are steady now, so I carry the bucket over to him. The raddle inside is a bright gorse yellow and there's a section of plank stuck into it. Anthony holds the tup in place with his right arm and uses his left to dip the plank into the thick raddle and apply it. He uses broad determined strokes, and the thick yellow paste sticks to the wool like wet clay.

Some people will put a dark tup to their darker ewes to keep the colour, or will try and keep them light. I prefer them mixed. White head and white legs, of course, and not too black, and not too light. It takes you a long time to get it right.

It's a tup's job to impregnate the ewes, but a farmer's job to check. Anthony will come back each day for almost two weeks, at least as often as he needs to and – he grins as he says this – perhaps a little more. It's an exciting time of year. He'll expect to see more ewes marked yellow with each passing day. If a lot of ewes are hanging around the tup he'll suspect the tup is not doing his job – once a ewe has fallen pregnant she'll lose interest. I learn something surprising here: when it comes to this time of year it's often the ewes that are keener than the tups. For some reason I had made an assumption that it would be the other way around.

You can waste an awful lot of time watching a tup.

After twelve days, if any of the ewes in this top field are unmarked, they will be put with another tup that will be marked with red. The ewes that have been rubbed with yellow will be taken into the yard and marked up with a spray that gives a more permanent colour.

Anthony will know, come lambing time, which ewes have been with which tup, at which time. The variety of colours used to mark the sheep result in a complex code that's specific to each farm. With a glance a farmer can tell the age of a sheep, whether a ewe is in lamb, which tup it has been with, when it is due to give birth, and even its history of recent vaccination or dosing. When the ewes are scanned the colour code will show which have twins, which have triplets, and which ones did not get pregnant.

Watching

here

you see it's one thing and then another cos there's always something that needs to be done and when it needs to be done it needs to be done well so there's no point rushing it - there's the passing of the year and the cycle of weather and things that always have to be done, one season slipping into the next with the eventual coming of heat in summer and cold in winter, and some things are never moved - like the Broughton tup sales on the last Tuesday of September and in Cockermouth on the following Saturday, the Swaledale sales in Hawes, the Herdwick Tup Fair in Keswick on the first Thursday after the third Wednesday in May - and other necessary things are fixed around these, like the preparing of tups, putting the yows to the tups, tending the yows, the job of lambing, the need to clip, gathering in the fell - oh, and then there's gathering, that's the best bit, and there's the pleasure and pressure of the shows, readying the fat lambs, trips to market, inspections - there is always something to be done and if the weather's against you or for you one thing will give way to another but never is there a day when there is nothing to be done, with mouths to feed and stock to check - although you can waste an awful lot of time watching a tup it's true - time spent considering which tup to match with which ewe is never time wasted and you'll need to watch the land and check for wall gaps and watch the ewes for signs of trouble or something amiss and keep a keen eye on the weather when a gather is needed, when your time is bound with others' time, cos it's not possible to gather a fell on your own and the dogs need watching and the young ones need training and inside the house in the kitchen there are meals to be made and washing to do and children have homework to do and there's a business to run here - the paperwork's never ending and the schemes are a nightmare - but there may always be time, a little bit of time, in the tugging season, to get out once a day to check your champion tup among the yows while in your head the counting's going on in your mental calendar and while your body's busy your mind's thinking ahead beyond the rain and dark of winter to the spring nights and the coming of the lambs with their demand for your attention and they'll be proof that your tugging plan paid off but it's not time and nor will it ever be to take your eye from the yard and the fell and the stock because when one task is finished there is always another one to take its place

Points of View

High on a hill, views stretch for miles

We stand in the field beside her house
Tup lambs in a cluster round the feed tray

It is as if she has the land folded into her

/ into the memory of fingers curved into wool
/ folded into laughter lines

*the most beautiful scene, my view, my view from here
there's no better place*

/ its dips and fells and the certainty of rock in her lilting voice
/ cloud shadows on Highbarrow in the greys of her eyes

*they're trying to pay us not to farm
but they don't see how much it takes to care for this all this*

/ her gaze lifts from a pet lamb to the broad back of the Pennines

well I'll tell yer that was the best tup this season

Heron

caught my eye

prehistoric double-U
against a grey sky

and the red of holly on a rise of rock
like a magnet draws me upwards

the heron settles among alders by the beck

I remain high
and quiet

bracken moving shows itself as a fox

tail up, darts,
merges back to brown

from here I can see the valley's tongue

the floor and the back of the mouth
and sheep, hundreds of them,

jostling speech of this land

Hannah, Ivan, Stephen, James
voices rise

below me, a kestrel holds air

wings trace rapid millimeters
tail as rudder, steadying
patience

clouting

December

*It takes two years off their life,
if they have lambs when they're shearlings,
if they're going to live on the fells.*



Not much of the thin wintery daylight filters through the half-open door and the overhanging roof, and the straw on the floor lends a glow to the place. The barn is chilly and has the aroma of sheep: grass and mud overlaid with lanolin. There are twenty, huddled in the corner, shuffling. Some bleat. Some grind their teeth. They are all shearlings (one-year old, having had one shear) and twinters (sheep that have seen two winters): not yet old enough to be put to a tup.

Anthony sits with his back against the wall and his legs astride a straw bale. Andrew, who has been helping Anthony on the farm for nineteen years now, ties a twinters' legs together and heaves it up and onto the bale. The sheep's tail is towards Anthony's belly, its body is between his legs and its head lolls at the other end of the bale. A woolly weight of forty to fifty kilos with its tied legs pointing uselessly upwards.

A very small number of farmers in Cumbria and the Scottish borders clout their sheep, and Anthony is one of them. Typically, fell-going ewes are kept away from tups until their third year, when they will be strong enough to breed well. Not all farmers have sufficient land to keep the ewes and tups separate, something that is even harder when flocks from several farms share the same expanse of common land. In effect, a clout is a cloth chastity belt (clout is the Cumberland word for cloth). It's a management tool that works well and helps to keep the flock hardy, with strong blood lines.

They'd be able to rear a lamb ok but if they're going to go on the fell it'd stunt their growth. You can winter them and have them really fit in the spring, but when you turn them up onto the fell next summer, by the autumn they can be quite lean. The lambs've sorta drawn them in, taken their body strength. You'd be able to tell them every year after that.

Each winter Anthony spends two or three days sewing clouts over the back end of his young ewes, a total of around 350 sheep. It can look quite fetching, as I discovered a few years ago when I first witnessed clouting. The material of choice was red velvet, and Anthony had offered me the chance to clout so that I could get a sense of what it felt like. It was a huge privilege, and a mark of trust. Today, he is doing all the stitching, but my own thumb is sore from tugging needle and thread through cloth last night: I have been stitching words onto the clouts. The twinters huddled in the barn today will be taking a poem into the fells.

When I first asked about adding a poem to the clouts, the response was willingness, and laughter, and curiosity, as well as a small amount of doubt that I would actually do it. There were jokes around the kitchen table, comments about what the neighbours might think, and confident assertion that none will be seen once on the fell. Nevertheless, when the clouts had been cut, Anthony's wife, Hilary, handed me a bundle; this year's colours are brown and grey. I spent the next few weeks composing a poem that could fit on the twenty pieces of cloth and would work well in its entirety as well as in isolated sections and, maybe, when rearranged by the sheep.

The phone call came last night to confirm that today was a good day for clouting. Anthony has selected some of his best Herdwicks to carry the poem and he's ready to start now, the first twinter in his lap. He lifts a clout from the pile by his side, which I have arranged in order, and adds the word 'stitched'. He lays the cat-flap shaped piece of material over the top end of the sheep's tail, and spreads his right hand over it. He

passes a long needle threaded with tough wool through the clout and deep into the fleece, making a line of stitches around the edge of the material. His calm confidence, I'm sure, helps the sheep stay relaxed. When I stitched a clout on a couple of years ago, I lacked this and it wasn't long before the sheep began to fidget. Anthony makes no sudden movements and our conversation is slow and gentle.

These needles, we've had them for years and years and years, but we can't buy them now at the same length. They're all shorter and fatter, not long enough.

When the clout is secure, Anthony ties the wool in a tight knot and cuts it with a pair of hand shears. He gently releases the sheep to the floor, and then accepts the next one from Andrew, who has already tied its legs together. I open the barn door and watch as 'stitched' trots away. Next comes 'in the'. When three twinters are clouted, the poem begins to take a new shape in the misty air of the yard. 'barn's stitched' and 'in the half light' come together.

Hilary joins us and it seems to be the perfect opportunity for the poem to find another expression. She steps outside, reading to the open air. Her reading is the first and last time the poem is spoken before it becomes dispersed.

stitched in the barn's half light

Anthony lets his needle rest. We listen.

turned out to the fell

The poem drifts into the barn from the yard.

bloodlines flow in hands, stock, dogs

Hilary's voice comes to us punctuated with a twinter's bleat. Something settles in the atmosphere of the barn that feels new, gentle.

past, present, future folded into land

Anthony and Andrew have stopped moving. I find myself in a still-life image: men, sheep, barn, strip-light, wool, needle, boots, soft smiles. Even the parcel of sheep at the back of the barn has quietened. The words enter the barn into a scene that has been repeated over decades, and the pause in the flow of activity reminds me of those times on a gather when a farmer stands still on an outcrop to scan the land, an interlude between the action of running and shouting.

skyline caught in a twinter's eye

Hilary walks back into the barn and we continue chatting while Anthony works through the pile of clouts. The last one - 'twinters eye' - heads out to the yard and the poem reworks itself. Anthony calls his dogs to guide the sheep out to an inbye field. The unsuspecting sheep will wait here while Anthony clouts the rest of the shearlings and twinters. When they're finished tomorrow, he and Andrew will walk them to the

intakes and from there, to the fell wall, and through the final gate that leads to the common land. They'll be out on the fell for three months.

Herdwicks are drawn to higher land and these will not take long to walk themselves up to the exposed tops above the Duddon Valley, each heading to its own favoured patch. They know their heaf (also known as a heft). A heaf is the extent of a flock's grazing area, with unmarked boundaries where one flock buffers up against another, often on the ridge of a fell, or along a watercourse. More than this, some farmers say, a heaf includes a knowledge of the best spots for shelter and food on a certain area of the fell. Lambs learn their heaf from their mothers, and have been doing this on most commons for many generations. If a new flock is introduced, it is the gentle and determined efforts of a farmer, walking the flock up and back repeatedly, that help in the establishment of a heaf.

In Cumbria, which has the largest single area of upland common in Europe with swathes of shared grazing land free from walls and fences, the cooperative nature of farming depends on a balance of heafs. There are fewer commons with sheep on over winter than there used to be, as agri-environment schemes introduced since the 1990s have encouraged off-wintering to reduce grazing pressure. Anthony and his neighbours are among a small number of commoners who still have a significant number of sheep grazing on the open fell all year round.

Over winter, the grey Herdwicks and off-white Swaledales can be hard to see amidst washed out grass, crags, lichen covered rocks, snow patches and low cloud. The 350 clouded sheep, of which only twenty bear words, are part of the larger Turner Hall flock of over a thousand ewes, and will nudge up against sheep from other farms. Anthony's right: they'll not be easy to spot.

Clouting, December 2012

scents of sheep, wool, shit, grass, mud, straw
 tasks held in walls of brick and sound
 bleats, hooves, the grinding of teeth
 our own talk in soft light, laughter
 and the hush, outside, of winter rain
 things that build a farm

weight of yow on my legs, pressing back
 her broad flanks between my thighs
 and head lolling, eyes staring to nowhere
 my fingers sunk in fleece, lanolin smooth
 never reach the skin, only wool
 deep and primal warmth

stitch by stitch I pass needle through clout
 into fleece, and out again, stitch over stitch
 this swaledale between my legs, still
 container for something wild, vital
 pulsing with the urge to be out
 with wind, fell and sky

before the final line of stitches I am guided
check the tail's free, put your hand right in
 I venture beneath the fleshy tail flap
 and there my skin finds skin
 a world that's moist, warm, foreign
 utterly sheep

the last stitch and the final knot
 complete my small part in a cycle:
 hands, threads, twinters, ewes
 lines through land, lines of life
 I lift the sheep off the bale and I stand,
 legs and fingers stiff

Clouting the Twinters I
December 2014
(initial form)

stitched in the barn's half-light
turned out to the fell
bloodlines flow in hands, flock, dogs
past, present, future, folded into land
skyline caught in a twinter's eye

Clouting the Twinters II
 December 2014
 (jostled in the yard before going to the fell)

half-light turned out stitched

in the dogs

barn's present

skyline

bloodlines flow

to the fell

hands

twinter's eye

caught

in

past

folded future

into land

in a

flock

Midwinter

I walk between fallen walls

step over sky caught in puddles

hawthorns catch my hair

in the fading

light of the shortest day

dipping

I pull my hat over my ears

pass through

the old ways

each breath new

it is not a simple case of

looking back

or

looking forward

this midpoint : year's pivot

change and constancy

weighted

clouds flare to orange

the way ahead

open

wintering

January

*turned out to the fell
folded into land*



January is a dark month. Winter is deepening. A low lid of cloud has locked grey into the land, and there are biting winds. Rain seems to be relentless in its dragging down of clouds and wetting of the ground, and, in the higher reaches, the land is weighted under snow and ice that makes for a good photograph but quickly sends fingers and toes into painful numbness. Even though we've passed the shortest day of the year the days do not feel as if they are extending.

In January most of a farmer's work takes place in the yard and the lower inbye land. Sheep and cattle need to be fed and buildings maintained. The fell flocks are left up high and checked only occasionally, and are seldom seen. I have taken to the fells but don't expect to see anyone else up here; few walkers take to the high ground on short cold days.

*I doubt you'll see any of them out there.
They'll be hard to spot.*

Last night, Anthony told me he had been out a few times, and hadn't seen any of the sheep that we've come to call the poem sheep. But I'm curious. I want to see words wandering.

There has been a small change in the weather, a window of dry after a week of downpours. I am out on the drenched fell with Rob, my husband, who is a photographer and has a keen eye. Together we will hunt for an elusive poem.

The air is absolutely still. Not a breath of wind. We are walking through a picture. All sounds are crisp and clear, staccato almost: the tumble of the beck sounds like one splash after another, a string of bubbles; a bird's startled call is loud and urgent, and then gone; a sheep's cough short and distant. Each note of this winter overture is isolated and stopped from dispersing by the same high pressure that's forcing fog to lie limp across the sea to the south. The ground reveals itself in sound as I walk. Each millimetre is monitored like the syllables of a sentence pronounced by each meeting of foot and ground: heel then sole then toe.

I hear gronk, gronk. Above me, a raven calls to a mate I cannot see. Wolves once walked where I now tread. I have heard about a cooperation of keen eyes and sharp teeth, with ravens alerting wolves to the presence of a carcass, working in a partnership with equal fluidity on land and in sky. I am taken back through history in my imaginings as I track the silhouette of wide wings and diamond tail against the sky, and then lose the bird in the shadows of crags. The raven is taken in by the land, absorbed into a spectrum of greys.

turned out to the fell

I'm not optimistic about seeing a poem sheep. If anyone knows about the likelihood, it would be the farmer who's worked and walked these fells for decades, and his words echo in my head. I'm in a hunting ground that encompasses thousands of acres of undulating ground: crags, gullies, tarns, scree fields, bogs, quarry discards and exposed fell tops. Given that there are sheep from other flocks up here, the poem sheep account for at most one percent of the sheep hiding themselves from the winter weather.

My hopes rise when Rob spots a sheep standing beneath a bent hawthorn. I can see that it's clouted – there's a dark brown target across the sheep's back end – and I use the binoculars to take a closer look. But there is no word. Through the binoculars I can see that this is a Swaledale sheep, and as all the words are being carried by Herdwicks I need to locate one of these, which is far more difficult: from a distance they often look like rocks.

We press on, gaining height. There's a fierce attention and little time for stopping to rest. I want to find out what has happened to the words, and Rob wants to capture an image. We're motivated and determined.

It occurs to me that what we're doing echoes the task of a shepherd looking for a specific ewe, scanning the land for movements and distinguishing one sheep from another by reading coloured marks on their fleeces. A red spot on the back left hook marks a Turner Hall sheep. Some that we see are marked with the smit of another farm. This makes my task harder but, like a shepherd, I will continue until I succeed, or until the weather or the night drives me back.

We reach the lower skirts of White Pike, its conical form rising in lines of grey crags and screes interspersed with pale grass, then snow. The land has spewed up rocks. Cold has shattered them. I let my eyes adjust, as I would if I were searching the twilight sky for stars. Some of the boulders move and I realise they are sheep. None of them are carrying words.

The spaces between the words have extended; the land, and my presence in it, have become more prominent. Yellowing grass, rock, and deep sphagnum moss at my feet, which are beginning to feel damp. Breeze on my cheeks. Below, Duddon Valley lies flat, the river's course edged by leafless woods. In the distance, England's highest mountain, Scafell Pike, sits bunched up with its neighbours like a fist of knuckles, and clouds slough off them like fine spun wool. I am immersed and attentive to the land at my feet and all around me but my mission remains my driving force: to locate the sheep.

We turn and head up towards the summit of White Pike. The sky's grey is shifting and I feel a sense of promise, a new burst of energy brought in by a pale sun. Soon we're walking in snow. I sink in. White space at my feet, all around me, and a white sky. The invisibility of a fell flock in winter is brought home to me. I kneel in the snow, and write the words I have not found.

skyline

Once we're down from the summit we take a brief rest in the ruins of a stone hut, built more than a hundred years ago. I sit inside it and imagine the hands of workers coloured grey by the stones they carted daily out of the mountain. Now the crumbled walls offer shelter from the wind for sheep, who have left strands of their wool on the lichened rock.

There's a rush of excitement when Rob spots a Herdwick with a clout that appears to have markings on it. I'm up in an instant and try to get closer. Of course, the movement startles the sheep and it trots off downhill. So I stand on a crag and look down, just as I have stood on crags and outcrops when gathering, taking advantage of the natural viewpoint. I peer through the binoculars and see that the clout is made

from old curtain material with a swirling black pattern on a white background. Again, there are no words.

The interlude of brightness passes as the wind picks up, and I begin to feel uncomfortably cold. The clouds have dropped. I watch them settle on the tip of White Pike and slide down its flanks in a delicate undressing as they thin to mist and slip onto flatter land. The wind blows rain in. Above, the raven calls.

folded into land

We walk off the fell beside the tumbling beck, its sound rising from a gorge and reaffirming its presence, way below us, hidden by the steep sides of land. The sun sinks into the sea to the west, leaving a dusky orange trace on the sands of the estuary.

Our hunt today would have been easier with dogs. Had we a Fly or Moss to locate the sheep and bring them out of clefts and gullies, and more speed in our own steps, our sightings would have far surpassed the forty or so clouted sheep we did see.

But we were just the two of us, wandering, our footsteps able only to take in a portion of the massive common. And we weren't trying to gather in the sheep; we peered into their world from a distance, intruding, without disturbance. The only way I'll get to see them again, for sure, will be to gather them in with Anthony when it's time to bring the larger flock in for scanning.

Raven

Your silhouette a patch of night
In day's winter white

I in raven's eye
as an arrow
through sky
through time

*Even the darkness has eyes
Even the darkness has eyes*

Wind from the west drives in rain
Your blackness tilts
spirals through white,
hollow bones in freefall

Queen of the fells, surveying folded land
Playing in half rolls and banking

Pushing empty space
towards more emptiness

I in raven's eye
sweep high

*Even the darkness has wings
Even the darkness has wings*

Corvus Corax you speak your name

to the wind
to the fells
to the valley

Lost Sheep, Knott Houses

my phone shows 'unknown number'
a man who's been out walking, calling me

there's a sheep stuck in the beck

my mind draws pictures of torrents and rain
recalls the tale that Wordsworth told*

*a sheep trapped, borne headlong
by the roaring flood, a child, bold
prisoner on a mid-stream rock
a father's instinct, fairy tale ending*

I snap myself out of it, return to practical

describe the place

I know it, find the grid ref,
call the farmer

it is dark when he calls back
his door closed on the heavy night
I imagine his feet just out of his boots
the phone in broad hands

*likely had been swept down the ghyll
found its way onto a rock
it's white water there*

*a ewe - not long in lamb -
gone out to the fell just before Christmas
likely it had been there a while
we've brought it in and fed it*

two hundred years are held
as if between silvered glass
a mirror between stories

*William Wordsworth: The Prelude VIII 1805 version lines 222-310

Footprints at 700 metres

snow had fallen thick

waiting to hold stories

something ran

returning

February

*Gwyah way out , gwyah back out
Gwyah way out , gwyah back out*

*Nell, Nell
Send on, that'll do, that'll do*



Thin wind, fast pace. No dawdling. This is a different order of hunt. We are four people, five dogs. Little time to catch breath – we need to get the sheep in. They flow over crag and bog and scree and rise and drop; so do the dogs; so must we; in the flow of the mountain and the wind and the flock.

You have to read the land with your feet, if you're gathering, with your eyes to the sheep and to the ground (lacking the practice I can't do both, at this pace). I have a sense that even in the densest fog, when a walker might turn to compass and map, a farmer could navigate his own heft for several miles by reading the rocks at his feet. As I walk alongside Andrew, he calls to his dog Fly, urging her through scree to worry a sheep out of a tight crag. Keeping an eye on her, he points half way up the slope:

That rock has moved. Must have been the rain.

I am walking – running – and Anthony comes up from the side, standing on his quad bike like a jockey, turning the squat machine with finesse, avoiding boulders and boggy patches, and whistles to the dogs.

*Moss, Moss,
Fetchon, Fetchon*

A curtain of hail sweeps away the view then sears my face, a wall of pins.

The dogs are fluid streaks on the land. There are two of us high on the flanks of White Pike, and two below, gathering in the sheep, in pockets of two and three, then ten, then twenty, thirty. A hundred. Parcels funnelled between outcrops and around the skirts of the fell. The wind is carrying the shepherds' calls and the dogs' barks, and the sheep are carrying themselves into one large group, coaxed down from the common to the fell wall and a gate. They become a mass of grey and white, of head, horn and haunch, and we move behind them to keep them there.

After three months on the fells we don't know whether the words will have survived, but they begin to show themselves.

The first word we see is 'caught'.

In a morning of just over three hours we gather about three hundred sheep and walk them down from the fell to the intakes, below the fell wall. Over the next few days Anthony and Andrew and their dogs gather the remaining eight to nine hundred and separate the clouded ewes from the others. They try to do it when the rain eases up, but it's not always possible.

*You never know
what weather's going to come to the fell.*

When it's fair enough to bring the twinters and shearlings in to remove their clouts I drive in under a grey sky and walk out beyond the yard until, from a rise in the land beside a grove of oaks, I see a movement of sheep: a mass of wool, and behind them, Anthony and Andrew, and dogs keeping order. I join them and together we walk the ewes into the yard where, in the autumn, the sheep were dosed and marked.

The poem is a jostling of words in the midst of the wordless, a reconfiguration of thoughts after winter. Now and then, a half-seen phrase, moving. In groups of about twenty, the sheep are urged into a small pen where Andrew and I wait, penknives in hand.

We speak the words to one another as we see them, and then filter the poem sheep to one side, back into a half-lit barn.

Farmers make it look simple but holding a sheep is a practised art, and doing something to them, with a knife, is a particular challenge. I begin, fumbling, unsure. The sheep reflects my unease and fights against me, breaking free of my feeble grip as if it were slippery as a fish. I persist, becoming more agitated, as is the sheep, and then my feet slip on the ground that's wet with mud and urine. I fall with a hard-knee crash and bang my head on the wall.

I unravel myself from a crouch, take a few deep breaths, feel my feet grounded. I realise that the only way to do this is to calm down and take charge. My new attitude works. I hold the sheep with my fingers confidently gripping the thick fleece, and my legs strong against their flanks. I am squeezed into the small pen with twenty sheep and we are all pressing against one another. I fall into synch with the sheep, keeping each one still and calm as I use the knife in my right hand to slice through the stitching around the clout. My feet are flat, my back bent, my face on the job, and the scent of wet wool, urine and rain on the fell is strong. My immediate world is entirely sheep.

I discard each mucky clout as it becomes free. I am not as fast as Andrew, but I feel in control now. I'm able to talk as well as cut, and ask Anthony about the sheep we're working with.

The weaker ones, I'll be selling them this year. That one, never been to the tup, should be plump, a three shear, never put the weight on. That one, shearling, ts'had diarrhoea. That one, Swaledale, its lower jaw is too short. I'll be selling all those.

We let each ewe out when its clout is removed, passing it through a second gate in the pen towards Anthony, who checks, doses and marks them, and sends them through the race into the largest pen of the yard where the stone wall butts up against ash trees. It becomes harder to catch and hold a sheep as the numbers decrease. I leave the last ones to Andrew.

We work on groups of twenty sheep at a time, backs bent, knives out, legs strong. The clouds draw in and we put on waterproofs, pull our hoods up against a light rain. I make a note of the order of the poem as each poem sheep appears and is sent into the barn. Only nineteen of the twenty have come back: 'in a' is still out there.

When all the other ewes have had their clouts removed, it is time for the poem to be taken off. I step back; it seems right that the poem should pass through the farmers' hands. Andrew completes the process that Anthony started. He works fast and removes the clouts from whichever sheep he can reach.

The poem clouts, smelling of lanolin, shit and rain, rest in order of their removal from the sheep. This line of clouts, which are usually thrown away, is the end point of an annual cycle of careful work, vital to the success of farming here.

The poem has been to the fell, where it has been unnoticed, and it has returned changed but maintains its essence. It feels symbolic that its short life reflects the hard work of farming in this treasured landscape, and the relative invisibility of this work in the eyes of the general public who cherish this land, yet seldom hear the voices of the farmers who tend it.

The poem's one-time spoken existence in the misted air outside the barn as Hilary read it, and the journey of its words on the trods and crags of the fells, will fade into the past, a memory mixed with scent and rain and conversations, shared by just a few of us. The practices of lambing, gathering, tugging and clouting will be repeated and repeated, folded into a history that is still being laid down.

Clouting the Twinters, Returned
(in order of arrival in the yard)

into land

twinter's eye

future in the stitched

turned out

bloodlines flow to the fell

hands dogs

past

barn's skyline

folded

half light in flock

caught

Clouting the Twinters, Removed
(in order of removal)

bloodlines flow

barn's hands turned out in future

in the past

folded skyline

stitched present into land

dogs caught

twinter's eye

to the fell

flock

half light

scanning

March

*Twenty two geld –
I could do with less.*

Low Beekside		43
geld	11	11
single	122	104
twins	40	57
triplets	0	1
	<u>173</u>	<u>173</u>
	11.6%	12.7%

Frost on the ground. The falling full moon is orange as an owl's eye and the day is waking, a slow lightening. The top of Blencathra is beginning to glow but here, tucked into the feet of the fell in Mungrisedale, all is dim. Hooves and bleats and bangs echo against slatted walls. Dogs bark.

I'm in the barn at John Rowlands' farm, where there are more than two hundred yows, ready to be scanned. We stamp our feet and rub our hands to keep warm, our own breath mixing with the mist of sheep while we wait for the scanning team to arrive.

Before scanning became common in the mid 1980s a farmer wouldn't know how many of his ewes would have twins, or if some were carrying triplets; nor how many had not fallen pregnant. You can't tell just by looking at them. Now almost every upland farmer will have his sheep scanned; a small number of scanning specialists make their way around Cumbria, moving from farm to farm at the tail end of winter.

Once a farmer knows which ewes are carrying twins, he or she can keep them closer to the farm buildings and give them closer attention; those that are geld (have no lamb) can be sent to poorer fields or back out to the fells. A farmer can head into the lambing season with a better idea of what to expect.

*The biggest problem is that if you don't scan these,
you could feed them all as singles.*

Most upland farmers with a fell going flock would tell you that they don't want too many twins. A healthy ewe and lamb will be sent to the fell as soon as the weather is warm enough but twins need to be kept down for longer than singletons. This puts more pressure on the farmer to maintain the quality of grass in the pastures, and gives the lambs a shorter time to learn their heaf on the fell before they are brought down again for winter. There is, however, a wish for at least some twins, so there is a kind of insurance against the inevitable loss of lambs, and a good output can bring more money from the selling of fat lambs later in the year. Each farmer has his or her ideal number depending on their own business and the kind of land they have on their farm but, as with everything in farming, will work with whatever they get.

Once you'd get very few twins, now it's different.

The scanning team arrives – three women with a trailer containing a heavy old car seat, a large metal framed cage, and a large box with a blue tarpaulin over it. John, and Matt, who's here to help, lift the kit out. One of the women, Lesley, settles into the low seat facing the blue box so that she can see the screen inside it. The metal race is directly to her right, so she can reach the sheep inside it.

John and Matt urge sheep into small clusters and cajole them, one by one, into the scanning bay. It's a fast operation and it's hands on; we all do a bit of pushing from behind or from time to time grab a horn to keep the sheep moving forward. They are mostly Swaledales, with a few Cheviots or crosses. There's a lot of bleating and clanking as each sheep passes into the metal cage, is scanned, and then let out.

Lesley's eyes are focused on a screen inside the box while, to her right, sheep pass by. Over her right hand she has an orange plastic glove pulled all the way up to her elbow

and presses the ultrasound scanning probe to the belly of each yow, bringing the cold of morning to their barn-warm flesh. Bright blue shapes appear on the screen and she calls out.

*One. One. One.
Two. One. Two.
Geld. Two. One.
One. One. Geld. One. Two.*

Two other women stand ready with a selection of coloured spray paints. A ewe carrying one lamb is let out unmarked. A mother of twins is marked with red spray paint, and a ewe with an empty womb - geld - gets a spray of orange. Green is for triplets. Once scanned, the ewes rush out and into the yard, where they huddle together. There is frost on the ground in the yard and still no sun.

The scanning and spraying is rapid. In these temperatures, everyone's hands are cold. The chill air seems to freeze thought, forcing redoubled effort to keep concentration. On the screen the twenty second burst of blue-grey colour blobs that are impenetrable to most of us reveal a lamb, a life. Once or twice, there's confusion and the women laugh when they get the colours mixed up.

*I scanned my friend on the kitchen table. Discovered she was
having twins and she didn't know!*

My feet get colder and colder as the minutes draw on, but the rest of me is warm and we keep alert by watching sheep and chatting. John talks about the Angus cattle on the fell and his plans to put Luing cattle out as part of a conservation grazing scheme. The impact of cattle is different from that of sheep; cattle graze in such a way that a greater variety of grasses and plants can thrive. They also help to churn up the earth and break up matted grass, which can become a barrier for other plants. On other farms where cattle have been introduced, I've encountered patches of ground where hundreds of orchids grow.

John talks about the yows as they pass through the scanner: which lambed twins last year, which are on their first year, which have had problems before. The yows' breath steams and they bunch up together, bang against the railings, bleating as if complaining about the disturbance.

*Ay, they're pretty tough usually aren't they,
until they decide to die, and then that's it.*

Matt tries to avoid putting one of the sheep through and I ask why. He tells me it's a male that somehow got into the group, but then he grins. He and John decide to usher it through to Lesley. She's entirely focused on the screen in front of her and is in a rhythm now. Her arm operates the probe almost mechanically. She calls the sheep geld and it is sprayed orange.

Until the job is finished, John can only make an estimate by looking at the colour markings on the sheep. The actual figure will be revealed when the machine shows the number of singletons, twins and triplets, and the overall percentage of offspring.

*If I end up with 110 per cent, 115 percent lambs, I'd be happy.
The last few years I've been down to 105%. But I'd like to see a
bit more selection with gimmer lambs.*

By 8.30am just over 260 sheep have been scanned and the figures are calculated. The result is not far off what John was hoping for, and there is only one yow carrying triplets. He won't know whether the lambs will be gimmers (females) until they're born.

We step out of the barn's wide open side and gravitate towards the sunlight that has now crept into the yard. It warms our finger tips, noses and legs, and brings out smiles. The scanning equipment is put back in the trailer, and the three women leave for the next farm – but not before John tells them that one of the gelds wasn't quite what they thought it was.

John and I head to the kitchen for a cup of tea and some warmth. When we're inside, John tells me about his life on the farm and the land around him. He mentions a small forest of stunted oak trees on the steep side of the fell behind the farm, where the trees are no more than five or six feet tall. It plants a seed in my mind and I know I will go and visit these trees soon.

Mungrisedale Oaks

in this wood I crawl

oaks hunkered into hill
I am hunkered into them

all around us heather
our bent and twisted forms
against the steep sweep of hill
as unlikely as a frozen dance

I am humbled beside
a three-foot-high tree
trunk thinner than my wrist
coppering in low winter sun
its skin wrinkled as if knees
as if

these trees walked here

and stopped
a frieze of antiquity

I have never seen such strong delicacy

I am stumbled
trespasser
in a secret world

Boots

I saw boots
 at rest by the door

I once walked past them
 past farm yards
 latched kitchen doors

from the grassy sea of fells
Nab Scar, Fairfield, Hart Crag, Red Screes,
Raise, Bow Fell, Helvellyn
where I drank in views
breathed in sky lark song
drank tea and snacked
sheltered from wind
let go my rat-race life

I imagined Wordsworth
 compelled into poetry

fancied myself the first
 to step over that bog
 onto that rock
 the only one to see the misted ridges
 rolling like breakers from the Irish Sea
 before night descended

I soaked up the land
through the soles of my feet
the pores of my skin

not knowing, then, that boots clad
in earth, mud, shit
left standing at a door
 speak volumes

Temporary Uniform

green or grey
 colours of land and tasks pressed
 into plastic overclothes
 that meet the one sure prediction:
there will be weather

rain, often sideways, temperamental
 the penetration of mizzle
 the drench of downpour
 wind, sharp outside the shippon
 the cruel cold wave of rushed air
 as we ride the quad to the intakes
 and then there's worse
 the needled fall of hail

sometimes it's fair
 but even then we'll wear these
 against the stuff of farming
 sheep spittle, slaver on the thighs
 of my shit-em-up trousers
 mud from the ankles up
 residue of puddles, urine
 dog's rub, dust, wool
 and sometimes blood

I learn the knack of extraction
 how to slough this second skin
 around upright wellies
 tops gaping, ready to be stepped into
 to be walked out
 to the yard once more

lambing

April

*Lambing's always alright innit?
They either die at the beginning
or they die at the end.*



Winter clings on, outstaying its welcome. Up here the temperatures can be as much as ten degrees lower than in the lower villages and towns. The farming year is timed carefully so that the fell ewes don't start lambing until the middle or end of April. Even then, there's no guarantee that you've seen the last of the snow.

Two nights ago it started snowing at seven. We were out til nearly midnight fetching lambs in. The snow was thigh deep in places.

Brockstones Farm nestles into the rocky side of the fell at a little more than 400 metres above sea level, and a little less than 400 metres below the wind-scoured summits of the fells. I have driven up from Kendal, where the sun is blazing and daffodils are in their last flush of gold. Here, they've just started flowering. I've done right to bring my warmest clothes.

I find Hannah in the shippon, a long, low-roofed building that keeps some of the winter cold out and has a few pens for sheep that need attention; there are more straw-strewn pens in the adjoining barn. Hannah and her mum Margaret are doing the rounds: a ewe with twins but only one tit; a ewe with triplets; one with a prolapse that needs to be watched when it gives birth; another ewe with a struggling lamb. Ivan, Hannah's dad, is in another barn and Stephen, her partner, is out in the fields. The Dickinson family has been working here since 1939, so they've had more than 70 lambing seasons here.

Hannah steps over a metal hurdle into a pen and steadies herself, legs astride a thick-fleeced ewe, then leans over. She wraps her hand round a swollen black tit and forces milk into a plastic jug, working on both tits until there's enough milk to fill a bottle for one of the triplets: a ewe has only two tits and with three lambs it's usually the case that one of them loses out. Extra bottles make a lot of difference.

Looking after the sheep is only one part of the job – each pen must be well-cleaned in between use, and restocked with fresh straw. Matthew, who is six, shows me how to apply the antiseptic spray, using the pump action to bring the liquid to the head, and how to spray into all the corners, and cover all the floor, then release the gas and set it aside, ready for next time. Hannah's older son, James, is moving feed from the store, where it's piled ten-foot high, to the barns, in his very own purple wheelbarrow. He's fast, and proud, and eager to tell me how things are done.

It's early in the season – the lambs have only just started coming – but already the special-care pens are full. We walk through to the barn and take a look, fill up the feed and water buckets for the ewes, and make sure the lambs are suckling. They are puny looking and uncertain on their feet. Hannah and her mum bend over the Swaledale ewes, reach their arms down to grasp the tiny lambs, and encourage them to latch on. Some will need bottle feeding. Hannah talks me through the short history of each ewe. The fluffy cute lambs of Easter-cards don't feature here, where the coming of new life is closely aligned to struggle and death.

That one had three but one was wasted.

We grab a cup of tea before setting out to the intakes to check the flock. In the kitchen where the Aga is always on and the kettle warm, the table is a tumble of biscuit tins,

plates, papers, Easter egg boxes, cordials. Hannah reels off a litany of losses while she runs her hands under the tap, washing off the stuff of a day: feed, straw, warm milk, blood, fluid, iodine, antiseptic. She turns to face me, reaching for the towel hanging from the low ceiling. Poised in a rare moment of stillness in a weary lean against the sink, she recounts the lambs that wasted out on the fell or didn't make it after being brought back to the barns, and the ewes that perished.

The Brockstones flock of almost a thousand breeding ewes - Rough Fells, Herdwicks and Swaledales - are hefted to the fells that cradle a valley of river, rock, pastures and meadowland. The summits of Yoke, Ill Bell, High Street, Kentmere Pike and Harter Fell offer a picturesque frame for the ever-changing sky, and paths regularly enjoyed by walkers, but it's a challenging work space for the Dickinsons who frequently make the trek to the tops to gather in flocks.

Right now, the focus is not on the high, cold reaches of the land, but here in the yard and in the intakes. The tasks are relentless and take up the nights as well as the days: a round of checking sheep, fetching some into the barns, taking others back outside, ensuring there's feed where it's needed, assisting with troublesome deliveries, and, occasionally, having a bit of sleep. There are thirty cows in calf as well.

Most of the cows do fine left on their own. Now I've said that, well, you know what'll happen.

James is jumping up and down with excitement, wanting to show me his ewe. We walk together through the yard and over the beck to a steep parcel of land that's sheltered under trees and strewn with boulders. James shakes the feed bucket and his ewe trots over to him, two healthy lambs by her side. Higher up, beside a boulder the size of a small caravan, we spot a black lamb. James takes to the sheer slope like a fell runner and I follow him up. Beside the stone wall we find a newly arrived set of Herdwick twins teetering on their young legs. They're looking good; Hannah will head up later to put iodine on their cords and check the ewe.

Hannah and I are both dressed in waterproof coats and over trousers, woolly hats, wellies. The daylight is beginning to fade and with a trailer fixed to the quad we rumble out of the yard, along the lane and up a stony track to the intakes. Hannah circles the quad around the walled-in field and we both eye up the sheep. She glances up to the tree tops as we pass, frowning at the nests of carrions.

We sometimes put a dead lamb on the wall to give the crows something to distract them. But they do prefer them fresh.

I spot a ewe with a bulge of red emerging from beneath her tail; it's a prolapse. We drive closer then get off the quad so we can get to the sheep - two dogs, two women and a crook working together until Hannah can get a grip on the troubled ewe and coax her into the trailer. Then we see a new set of twins. Night is not a safe time, so we need to get these twins in as well. The way to bring the ewe in is to grab her lambs. They're tiny and still slow, which makes it easier for me to catch them; I tuck one under each arm. Their skinny warm bodies are lighter than a bag of sugar.

*Fox got one yesterday. Then there was a set of twins wasted,
over there, by the wall.*

With the ewes and twins settled into the shippon and the buckets of feed and water checked once again, we head back out on the quad bike. Daylight is fading and night approaches through a changing prism of blues and pinks. I see the first stars revealed as the embrace of fells turns black. We're in the gloaming and Hannah is keen to check the higher fields before darkness falls.

We find another new set of twins, born some time earlier today. Hannah manages to get to them despite a very protective mother that she has to shoo away. She checks each lamb and is content that they are strong enough to be left out tonight. She puts iodine on their cords and leaves them to the care of their mother.

Ewes that are about to lamb are often quiet and seek shelter. As we head down the hill we see the swollen form of a ewe tucked into a wall, rising and falling with heavy breath. There's a small wet new life lying at her feet but she doesn't move, not even as we approach. She seems distressed and isn't licking her lamb. Hannah walks over and heaves the ewe onto its side, her arms strengthened by determination and years of practice. She reaches her right arm in, up to her elbow, with her shoulder against the heaving flank of the prone sheep. Hannah's eyes move as if tracking the movement of her fingers in the moist warmth of the ewe, and she sighs, just as the ewe is doing. There is a strange harmony in the dying light. Hannah pulls her forearm out and then places it back into the panting ewe, more certain now about the angle she needs to take. The nose of the lamb emerges first. Hannah scrapes it clean with her fingers, eases out the body, cradles the lamb in her hands and rubs it against the ewe's muzzle. These three cannot be left overnight so we'll return with the trailer later to fetch them in.

Back at the house Margaret has given dinner to the boys but there's no time yet for Hannah to stop. There's another round of checking and feeding to be done. Some dead lambs will be skinned and their fleeces neatly slipped over the tiny bodies of orphans or triplets that aren't thriving, leg holes as closely fitted as the arms of a babygro. In these scented suits of disguise, the new lambs can be introduced to their surrogate mothers, who more often than not take them on as if they are their own. Those that can't be mothered become pet lambs, bottle fed. Some will be kept warm by the Aga in the kitchen alongside shoes and socks laid out to dry.

There's no lamb in the kitchen yet, but it's likely there will be. In the next few weeks more than nine hundred ewes will lamb; the Dickinsons will do all they can to keep as many alive as possible. At other farms I visit, the story is the same: while the lambs are coming, all the attention is on preventing or dealing with problems. Only at the end, when all but a few ewes have lambed, is there the chance to step back; to take stock, and pleasure, in the new generation.

Notes made while lambing

stilltime between day and night
lambs slide

from belly to grass

she tells me how to know:
*a yow alone in the lee of a wall
will birth soon*

after sun's sink
the silhouettes of fells
black as a swaledale's head
wall in this womb-dark land

beneath the prolapsed bruise of sky

out of sight: foxes
ice
carrion

here: newborn twins

she shows me how to tell:
*feel here for the swell of first milk
they will be ok*

a yow fights for breath
blind human fingers feel
for life in dark hope and find
a wet arrival that meets earth
as frost creeps in

*nine hundred to lamb
this is just the start*

(When it's) Lambing

time takes on a new

rhythm

day folds into / night folds into / day after day / after day

rounds of the farm

yard intake yard barn intake

feeding watching feeding fetching

torches in the harsh black of night

quad choking into life

meals snatched

sleep halved

nowhere else to focus

only yows and lambs / lambs and lambs / lambs and yows

hour upon hour / day after day / task after task

watching fetching lifting carrying guiding

dealing with deaths

swearing at the foxes / the curse of April snow

carrion's callous grab of eyes and tongues

burdens lodged in the weariness of bones

and small victories won in warm hands

marked with smiles / named / remembered

little time to wonder

at the gold stroke of sunrise

or the pinking close of day

light's coming and going

settles as bookends

around cold, danger and hope

and the gradual lessening of worry

Looking back (after lambing)

*it's been steady
it's been alright*

*anyone who tells you they've had a great lambing time
is lying
anyone who tells you they've had no lambs dead
they're lying
or they only have two sheep*

each year it's as if you're stuck
slow motion walking into wind
on the high fells, always moving
 just to stand up
 just to stand still
summoning every last scrap of strength
and then finding more
body set, facing forward

until eventually the wind heaves its final gusts
and then there's time
to look back and breathe
and count: more than it seemed
when your mind was blunted by the losses

now the intakes are alive
young bodies filled out
 black lambs with white faces
 white lambs with black faces
yows patient in the midst of play and hammering sucks

yes it's been steady

meeting

May

*There's some bonny black lambs
that've come from that tup.*



I lean against the pens, taking care not to rest my hands over the side where horns and heads could bash them. It's the first Thursday after the third Wednesday in May, the traditional day for the gathering of Herdwick farmers after winter. Three years ago this was the first shepherd's meet I'd ever been to and it holds a special place for me.

I'm among a huddle of farmers. In the small field above the River Greta the pens are laid out on flat dew-wet grass. Four-wheel drives, pickups and trailers hem us in, and the sun is hidden behind a persistent stretch of cloud. There's no rain, as yet, and the temperature is beginning to warm up. With caution, you could say that Spring has just about arrived.

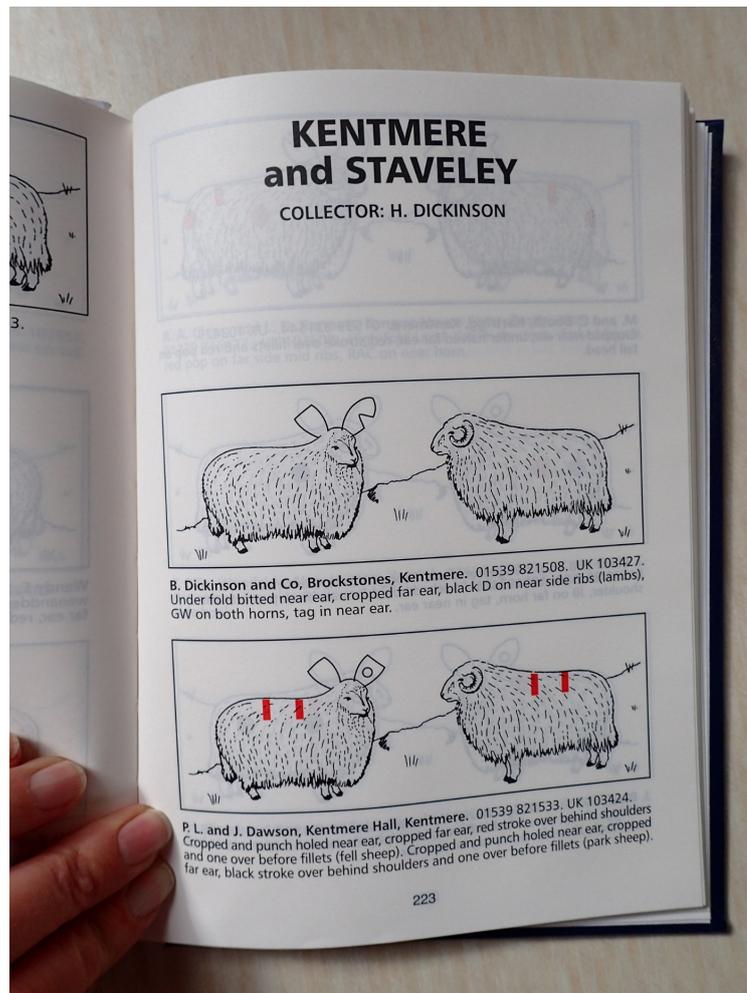
I take stock of familiar faces. The young brothers, Jack and Alex Bland, each hold a tup from West Head, and there's David Bland, their grandfather; Joe Weir, Stanley Jackson and Johnny Bland, who have flocks in Borrowdale; Peter Bland with a Knott Houses tup; Anthony Hartley, who I'd expect to be in with a chance for the big prize today; Hannah Dickinson with at least one tup that I recognise; Peter's son Robert, and Isaac Benson from Little Langdale, sporting a new beard. In this showing space little bigger than a tennis court there's a representation of fells and valleys that span hundreds of miles, and feet that between them have trodden almost every bit of grass, bog and rock that falls within the central fells of the National Park.

This meeting, the Keswick Tup Fair or Spring Fair, was originally held so that farmers could come together to return the tups they had borrowed from one another. Lending out tups happens less now than it used to but it does still go on. It's a way of keeping bloodlines strong and varied that side-steps buying and selling. The unwritten agreement is that if you borrow a tup you shoulder the cost of feeding it, and you look after it well as you're expected to return it in improved condition.

When I borrow a tup it'll get more spoilt than any of my own.

Doris, who farms out west in Lamplugh, joins me and points out the tups she has brought with her. Lambing has been alright, she tells me, and she's particularly happy with the blackness of the lambs that have come from the tup she and her husband Joe loaned. This year they have used a tup from Jean Wilson, who is one of the most revered Herdwick breeders.

Doris and I talk about lambing and the condition of the tups and watch the judging that's taking place in the central enclosure. Men and women stand with legs slightly apart, backs slightly bent. Each sheep is held in a gentle hand, and is rouged for the day with 'show red'. The red dust has rubbed onto jeans and waterproof trousers, and every hand is rusted with it. It's not the only mark though. Each farm has a 'smit' mark for its flock; a line or circle of colour pasted onto the fleece in a very specific place. One man told me he had worked on a farm for nine years before he was trusted to do the smit marking.



Each smit stays with a flock and it is very rare for a new farmer to alter the mark of the hefted flock he or she inherits. On the commons it is the smit marks, along with lug marks (clips in the ears) that enable one flock to be distinguished from another; each time a fell is gathered a farmer will gather in some sheep from the neighbours, and will know them by their smit marks. They read like a rudimentary script. The first flock book cataloguing all the marks was released in 1920; the most recent was produced in 2005. I have been told this may be the last that will ever be published.

The morning ticks on gently: conversations, showing and judging intermingled, cups of tea and bacon baps at lunch time. There are over twenty classes, starting with the best mouth, and then going on to categories including the best over-wintered, the best group of four tups, best pair of hogs (the younger male sheep, with thick brown fleeces), best coat, overall champion, and the most prized award, the Edmondson Cup.

It's gentle but not always sedate and from time to time a tup rears up or charges at another tup. West Head Herdwicks, reared from flocks whose heft includes hard, exposed land that sees little light in winter, seem to do this more than others.

That tup, that's the wildest Herdwick in the world.

Glenn Wilkinson and Will Rawling are judging. Each is the son of a farmer, and a grandson of a farmer, and is also the father of a son who has chosen to farm. Their

family roots stretch far back and are synonymous with valleys and fells – the Wilkinsons from Tilberthwaite, the Rawling family from Ennerdale. Both men have their chin tucked down towards their chest and a crease on their forehead.

Will wears his usual flat cap. He lights up a cigarette, stands with a hand on one hip, and surveys the tups. This line-up is for the award of the Edmondson Cup for the best three-year-old tup, and it's highly sought after. Will lets out a quiet word, which I don't catch, and raises one hand in a signal for the tups to be let free. They run in the space they have, testing the boundaries of the small open piece of grass. A few crash horns.

Standing by, watching, are other farmers I've come to know well – Jean Wilson, whose nephew is holding her tup for judging; Doris's husband Joe, who's always quick to make a joke; and James Rebanks, whose recently published book and rapid rise to fame is probably the reason a few more 'general public' have turned up today.

Jean has her hands in the pockets of her open green waterproof, and flaps it like a pair of wings to ward off a tup that's approaching her. When it's time to bring the tups back into line the farmers move towards them, arms outstretched, urging the sheep into a small mass and guiding them into a corner. Then each person makes a grab for their own tup. It's a quick tussle of hands, wool, hooves and horns. When the judges settle on a decision, Will raises his grainy voice and hands out the rosettes:

*Third George Harrison
Second Anthony Hartley
First Peter Bland*

The slightest smile passes over the face of the three men as they take their rosettes with a hand shake, and then turn and usher their tups back into the pen. Peter and Robert Bland urge their winning sheep through the pens to the back of the field, to the spot where the photograph is always taken, year after year after year, with the cup and the rosette, and the trees in new leaf as the backdrop. There's not a great deal of speaking and the loudest noise is the sound of the river. Photographers mutter instructions and the tup is positioned with precision.

*Move that leg an inch. Another inch.
It's too spread out, makes it look too low.*

Later in the Twa Dogs Inn, beer is flowing and tongues loosen. The pressure of showing has passed and talk shifts: how much feed was needed to make up for a lack of grass in this year's cold spring; farms that have changed hands; regulations and money. There's concern about the requirements in some agri-environment stewardship schemes for sheep numbers to be reduced to such an extent that the viability of flocks is being threatened. There's encouraging talk about commoners working together to come to satisfactory agreements; but I also hear about relationships breaking – it can be difficult to negotiate agreements that work for individual farms and for the commoners as a collective. I'm told of some older farmers who are less able to get out to the fell than they used to be and are taking payment for keeping sheep off the fells (as part of environmental protection schemes), and the problems this sets up for the future.

It's like they're being paid to not do what they're not doing anyway. Farmers being paid not to farm. What happens if someone younger wants to step in? What will happen to the hefted flocks?

I've had these conversations many times before; the challenge of finding stocking levels that suit a farmer while also reducing pressure on the environment is a common one and it's never straightforward. The idea of receiving payments 'not to farm' goes against the grain for almost all farmers who despite the hardships, couldn't or wouldn't see themselves doing anything else.

Despite these concerns, talk of money and politics doesn't take over; it seldom does. The conversation swings back to what's happening on the farm and the good elements of lambing. I bring out a picture that Rob took when he and I were gathering with Gavin and David Bland last month. We'd joined them to bring in some of their own sheep and some for Braesteads Farm from the snow-locked gullies below Helvellyn. The picture shows Gavin Bland with two dogs, looking out over a cold white land.

Willy Tyson recognises one of the dogs instantly as one of the two pups from his own bitch. She has turned into one of the best dogs Gavin has ever had; her mother, Willy tells us, was a wonderful dog too. They talk about the dogs and the family they came from, and about the fact that neither of the pups has produced a litter. The bloodline has stopped.

I drink my pint and think about bloodlines – dogs, sheep, shepherds. The Tup Fair, with the judging of good qualities, returning borrowed tups in improved condition, and talk of the lambs that have been bred from each tup, is a marker on the shepherding timeline. It's a marker of spring and another cycle beginning. The room hums with low voices and laughter, the sharing of good news and bad, gentle teasing, banter and serious talk, but most of all, community, commitment, resilience.

Outside, the sun has made its way out from between the clouds and there is blue sky. Spring is nudging its way in.

Marked

ear marked / under fold bitted near ear, cropped back ear
 smit marked / black D on near side ribs (lambs)

house under stones, erratics, badger setts / marked land
 shipman knotts, nan bield, harter fells / marked maps

ear marked / cropped and under key bitted near ear
 smit marked / red pop on near hook (twinters red pop on back of head)

nine years waiting before making that first red pop / marked time
 weather seeped into skin (coloured by the time of year) / marked hands

ear marked / under fold bitted far ear
 smit marked / red pop mid on both near and far mid ribs

blood land walls hands feet, heft to heft, ewe to lamb / marked lines
 narrow trods and seasons' browns and greens and wet / marked fells

ear marked / cropped and punch holed near ear, cropped far ear
 smit marked / red stroke over behind shoulders and one over fillets (fell
 sheep)

paperwork mountain on the kitchen table / marked page
 lines of wind and rain (youth rests in the eyes) / marked face

(this is where the) marks (are) / settled into fleece mind book and earth
 (this is where the) marks (are) / passed on passed on passed on

ear and smit mark descriptions from Lakeland Shepherds' Guide, 2005

Looking for Ouzels

*the problem with them
is they're fast
soon as you see em
they've gone*

I skirt the crag and climb into a yew
roost featherless bird

below me the river leaks into grass
birch bursts fresh green while ash waits in winter
water cascades from stone
the land is soaked

my face into wet wind
it's a long hour's trudge from the valley floor
to the roofless mouth of rocks
poised above the dark belly of Small Water

I climb into a cold cleft

wait

a glimpse of black against the sky
day's answer to a falling star

killing

June

It's cut and thrust, but it's an honest business.



There's a lingering smell of nothing, as if the cleanliness is somehow there to trick the senses. But it fails and beneath the disinfected air is the hint of blood and flesh. In the deboning and cutting room a line of clean, headless carcasses moves towards a line of men dressed in white trousers, white coats, white boots and blue nets pulled tight over hair and beards. Each carcass hangs neck-down from a hook passed through the ankle ligaments. One by one they are lifted from their rail and are reduced to parts. First a band-saw cuts through bones as effortlessly as if they were butter. Each smaller section is laid on the conveyor belt and makes a quick journey along the line of knives held in chainmailed hands.

Further into the factory I see the processing of the innards (hearts, lungs, livers, kidneys). The green-tinted spleens are thrown into a discard pile: this is the only part of the animal that won't be used.

I'm being led back to front, from the gathering of meat pieces to the bulk of a whole living animal, and I feel suspended somewhere between deconstruction and reconstruction. There's an uncomfortable distortion: life/death, animal/food.

I walk through lines of hanging carcasses in a white-walled fridge that's bigger than my house.

We can store more than a thousand in here.

Beyond this storage zone I am taken into a vast chamber where fleeces are being prized off headless bodies by giant mechanical arms on rails about ten foot above my head. I am among hundreds of workers dressed identically in white, each person fulfilling a unique role, as much a part of the machine as the metal tools and structures around them.

As I am directed further in I have to step through a moving line of carcasses; these have blood on them, they have not yet been cleaned. My guide puts a protective arm around my shoulder, timing our advance so that we find a space between two bodies. Their severed necks, raw and red, are level with my face. I bend and hold my breath. I don't want to touch.

The men who work here don't show such squeamishness: one caresses the carcasses with a tenderness while he explains the difference in muscle distribution, weight and shape; another, lifting a full carcass from its hook, wraps his arms around it as if for a slow dance.

Once through the maze of moving bodies, we enter the killing zone. That is actually what it is called. It's like they said to me at the start: this is an honest business. You can't mince your words when it comes to death.

There is a lot of blood on the floor. I brace myself. The clatter of moving rails and machinery is echoing off the bare walls and it's difficult to have a conversation so I swallow my questions and become fully focused on the scene in front of me.

Behind a high wall, scores of sheep are waiting in pens. Today, some of them are Herdwicks, but the quantity means no single sheep, once processed to meat, will be identifiable. One by one the sheep are ushered forwards so that they stand onto a conveyor belt and arrive from the pen into the factory and the hands of the three-man

team that will end their life. The first man places an electrical stunner onto the sheep's neck from above: the sheep becomes unconscious. The second man lifts the sheep and lays it, on its back, in front of the third man, who holds the knife: he cuts into the sheep's neck in one decisive move.

He slices into one neck, places the knife into a cleaning solution, takes a second knife out of the solution, and cuts the neck of the next sheep that has been laid in front of him. It's fast. It's mechanical. Between four- and five-hundred sheep pass under the knife in one hour. The man who makes the cut has to be Christian or Muslim; part of his job is to say a prayer with each slaughter. The meat is as near to pure halaal as it can be when stunning is used.

After the neck has been cut, the sheep is lifted and hung by one foot onto a moving rail which carries it to the next stage of the process. Each body jiggers and shakes. Sometimes they shake so much they fall, fall into the blood that has reddened the concrete floor. But only a few minutes pass before deconstruction begins: the back leg that is not hooked up is removed, and a cut is made into the fleece so that it begins to hang off. Then another man takes an ear in one hand and with the other severs the head completely, throws it into a pile with the other heads that have been removed. In less than half an hour each sheep will be in portions ready for packaging and sending to supermarkets.

I am not certain, if it's possible to be, which part of the morning has unsettled me most. If anything, the moment of death was the least disturbing. This surprises me, but perhaps it's because I knew that would happen, and I saw no suffering. The other elements were more unexpected; the quantity of animals was overwhelming, as was the speed of the work. And there is something haunting in the way communication in the factory is reduced to looks. Too noisy to talk, we glance at one another, unspoken feelings spread wordless between us, dark and lost like blood down the drains.

Later in the day to settle my nausea I walk through fields dense with fecund green and a dance of buttercups under a midsummer sky. I strip off and submerge myself in the transparent waters of a beck, miles and miles away from roads and factories. I float and open my eyes to see the trace of sunlight on river-bottom stones, and come out clean.

I don't want this first experience in an abattoir to be my only one. Just as I have spent time on many different farms and seen different ways of being with sheep and working the land, I'm keen to get a broader picture. I know there are alternatives, so I visit more than one, and I end up at one of the smallest. Someone once said to me:

*If I was a sheep,
I'd want to end up here.*

Inside, music is playing. The room is less than the size of an average barn and there are just six men here, with one woman, a vet, checking each carcass. All the sheep coming here are Herdwicks that have been born and lived their entire lives within the Lake District National Park. The music is playing on the morning show from Lakeland Radio and there's no banging or whirring of machines so we can hear the tunes and have a conversation. The men talk to one another across the room. Each wears a chain for a belt, with a sharpener hanging on one hip and a sheath for knives on the other.

The sheep are brought in one by one and the method of killing is precisely the same – stunning and then a skillful deep slice through the neck. But beyond this necessarily quick action, the pace is slow. I feel less troubled, perhaps because this isn't my first experience of slaughter, but more likely because we're chatting, and there's no heaviness in the atmosphere. Sun streams in from high windows and I can count the bodies around me on my own two hands. Still, the act remains the same, and I ask the owner how it feels to do this work day after day.

*I'm not hardened to it, even now,
but it is part of the process.*

Each body is gently processed. The fleece is pulled off by hand, the innards are removed with a single soft sweep and the hooves taken off with a sharp cut. There is time to talk, time to look at each sheep. I touch one. It is not sticky, it is not frightening. When *Food Glorious Food* starts playing on the radio I laugh, but the others do not seem to notice. I strike up a conversation with one of the men who is working on a carcass. He tells me that he has been in this line of work for fifteen years and has experienced several bigger places.

*I'm happy to stay here, I like it
when it's done this way.*

It's time for another batch of five sheep to meet their end. I feel nervous about watching the killing again but I want to. The cut into the neck is deep and decisive, starting high, under the ear, and moving down. It's instantly effective.

I am led out of the slaughtering room, just a few strides into the refrigeration zone. Each carcass here is stamped with the slaughterhouse mark and the mark for PDO, or Protected Designation of Origin. A parcel tag records the farm where each sheep came from and I read the names of many of the farms I know. My body recollects the fells around those farms, feels the land under my feet, the wind in my face.

I leave the building, feeling very slightly nauseous. I have a reluctance to lick my lips and they're drying up.

Outside the air is clear. The trees are bulging with summer green, the sky is a tease of white clouds against blue. The light eases my breath, curls into me. Cloud shadows on the surrounding fells race northwards and depart, leaving the uplands green.

Next time I go walking with Rob we trace the River Kent towards its youth against the scoured-out belly of land rising to Bleathwaite Crag. It's a misty day, though, visibility is poor and we turn back before reaching the source. Our route takes us through bog and it's a challenge to keep out of the peaty paste that can swallow a leg right up the knee with ease. We don't see any sheep – they are up on the tops of the fells, claiming the misty air and the quiet as their own. But we do see a deer, slumped with its neck stretched awkwardly forward into the bog, its rib cage revealed as a cavern, strangely yellow in the muted air.

Choice

This is not
what people want
to read about
delivery of death
is hidden
vacuum packed

I am in the cycle
of living of dying

I am caught
in the passing of things

I choose knowing
over guessing

and here is blood
and hands that bring forth blood

I watch up close
first the prelude
 then the death
 then the packaging

before seasoning and gravy
and leathered shoes

abattoir

the point of death rests on a knife edge
life turned to meat
trods and hefts irrelevant
the weathering sky forgotten

the point of death delivered by hands
whose killing score in just one hour
is four hundred
(six or seven necks severed every minute)

above the hands, oil-black eyes
fuel each deep cut
and the sharpening of the blade

their chill could keep a carcass cold for weeks

I am drawn into the line of hanging bodies
that shiver and jolt with the last play
of life and I am headless, struggling
for breath in a lake of blood
that runs rivers down drains

I cannot find words
neither prayer nor reason
to plug the shadowed bottom of eyes
that lock onto me
leave me pinned
holding the knife

deer skull

dark ooze of water over stone
rocks are islands in methane bog
the wind strokes sedge spikes
breathes cloud lower

close up the unmistakable reek
of death seeps from gaping ribs
yellowed skin stretched to glass
boned hull golden

in the open jaw teeth at a slant
flashes of flesh and gristle on bone
eyes lost and antlers proud
maggots in the last of the brain

it's a tough job cut thrust yank
tissue and skin resist sinews tighten
their last stubborn grip
the head is free

I leave the body twice defiled
walk the valley scale a crag
hide the skull its antlers fit my arm
from pit to tip

I will wait twelve waning moons
while weathers and worms scour
life's last shreds out of this death
polish it raw

Green

*'we see a thousand shades of green,
like the Inuit see different kinds of snow'*

*James Rebanks*¹⁰⁰

emerald moss on stone
grass a tender breeze, pale
wood sorrel, a kind of innocence
and bog-grass, brushed under mist

spring's ecstatic unfurl of bracken
midsummer birch mirrored in water
gives shine against the dull huddle of nettles
and there in a yaffle the flash of a woodpecker

at home, paint peeling from the barn door
remnants of work on wellington boots
the barrow rust like flaked clods
and blaze on inbye under sun

fell tops feint in autumn dusk
the joy of ash trees thriving
hard-won flush of hawthorn after winter
and on the bark, lichen's lizard-scale creep

the circular shine of crab apples
fallen on mud, young acorns
high grass ready for cutting
and the half-lit fells on the night of the longest day

five simple letters do not suffice
there is no lexicon
for this surround of life

¹⁰⁰ (*The Shepherd's Life*, p. 226)

clipping

July

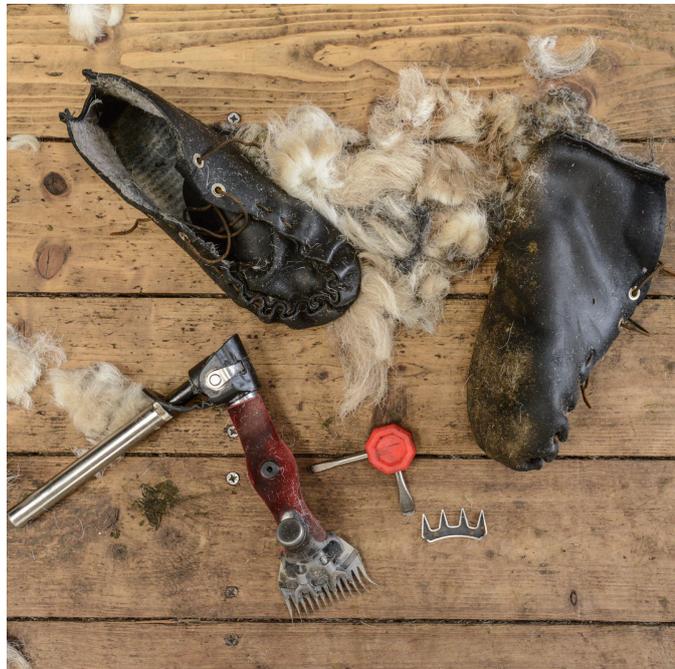
*Two thousand three hundred sheep,
three tonnes of wool.*

We're offered five hundred pound for that.

*Haulage might be a couple of hundred, then there's
the gathering in and loading up time.*

*If you use contractors they get
ninety-pence a sheep.*

It's not worth it. There are some who burn it.



Each ewe is sheared to the same rhythm beneath the bent back of a man. With one of the ewe's front legs drawn between his own to stabilize it, he begins with the neck, running the electric shears through deep wool in neat lines. When the neck is clear, the sheep is rolled and a strong hand works gently downwards, clearing the sides in curved furrows, taking in the underbelly, slowing down, and ending with the tail, in three careful strokes. Long firm runs of the blades down each leg strip them of wool, down to the hoof.

I watch the swaying movement of the back and shoulder and the smooth flow of arms, the forms of human and sheep coming into union. And I'm told that the control doesn't actually come through the hands that wield the clippers:

*Shearing's all done through the feet.
It's not about arms and shoulders.*

These contractors, who will do two- to three-hundred sheep in a day, and visit many farms during the season, have their own personal set of soft-soled leather moccasins, an essential part of their tool kit, finished with a single line of stitching. They use their feet like levers, lifting and turning the sheep with extensions of their toes or tilting their feet to one side or the other. Through them, they can sense the sheep's weight, balance and mood, and can direct, calm or agitate one sheep after the other.

When one sheep is clipped, the shearer releases his hold and it scuttles as it finds its footing and runs off. Then the next sheep is hauled into position by confident arms and the cycle begins again to the soundtrack of electrical humming and the bleating of lambs, waiting for their stripped mothers to return to them.

My job is to roll the fleeces. They are removed in one piece and I follow a method that will have been used for centuries, folding the fleece into itself and tucking in the longer neck piece to make a tidy bundle. I throw the fleeces one after another into an open sack that's large enough to take a hundred bundles. My hands are softened by the lanolin from the wool but small shavings get everywhere: in my clothes, in my hair and in my nose. I am immersed, again, in the scent and feel of sheep, and I am lulled by the rhythm of my own repetitions: I move in a small area, stepping forward to pick up a fleece as it falls from the sheep, moving away a few paces to roll it, reaching to throw the rolled fleece into the sack, then stepping forward again to pick up the next one.

Like anything in the farming year, shearing falls into a season but the precise days are dictated by the weather. If June is exceptionally hot it might be necessary to clip one or two sheep that are struggling, but generally it's essential to wait until July when the wool has reached the optimal length. Before that it sits too tight against the skin and the risk of cuts is higher.

Today is warm but I'm pleased it's not as hot as it has been in recent weeks. Farmers have been meeting at five in the morning, or earlier, to gather in the fell, taking advantage of the cool of morning to tackle the thousands of acres and the steep ascents.

*The dogs can't handle it, and there's no water for them where
they usually look. If you're not careful, you'll end up with a
dead dog.*

It's good too for neighbours to work together to gather in a common; clearing it over a few days following a different pattern each time. Inevitably, some sheep will end up on the wrong side of the fell, and these are brought back to their home farmyard by trailer. For most farmers this is a one-off trip, but occasionally, because of the layout of the land or an absent farmer, or where one flock has been so far reduced that another strays into the wrong valley, as many as a hundred sheep may need to be brought back by road.

It's warm business shearing and rolling fleeces but the barn is completely open on one side letting in a light breeze that keeps the air fresh and helps to disperse some of the dust and finer wool clippings. Occasionally, farmers shear outside under trees - sycamores are often used because they're plentiful in farmyards and offer wide patches of shade.

I notice each sheep being checked carefully during clipping. Now is a good opportunity to take a close look at eyes, ears, mouth, feet and body. Small cuts or infections are doused with disinfectant. Rot in the feet is cut out with a sharp knife and the hoof may be trimmed at the same time. I wince even though it's not my foot. I am shown one lamb whose belly is crawling with beige maggots, a secondary problem that can follow on from a cut or infection. There is a hole about the size of a ten pence piece where the maggots have started to gouge the flesh. The maggots are beginning to die. If they hadn't been spotted and treated, they could burrow into the sheep, and eat it alive.

On a large farm, shearing will take a few days to complete, and even then there may be a small number of sheep that evade the clippers: missed from the fell gather, perhaps hidden away on a gnarly crag or steep gully, or strayed to a neighbouring heft. If another farmer doesn't gather them in, they'll turn up in the autumn with heavy raggedy fleeces. Such stragglers are clipped one by one, often with a pair of hand shears. Later in the year I witness this in the hush of an empty barn, low light filtering in from a brooding sky. The cutting is gentle and firm, the single sheep coaxed into submission and sitting or lying in experienced hands that follow the contours of its summer-fattened body and release its burden.

Wool was once the backbone of a farmer's income but those days are in the distant past; shearing is a necessary management activity that's unlikely to bring in any money. Some farmers choose to store it for a year, gambling that the price offered by the Wool Board will improve. Others send it straight off, in another form of gamble, paying the price of haulage and hoping that there will be some return. Others decide to burn it, although this is becoming much rarer. It's not legal.

One way of getting a large batch of sheep sheared, quickly, is to donate a number – perhaps 250-300 – to the annual International Herdwick Sheep Shearing competition. It's early July when I jostle with a crowd in front of a stage in the Cockermouth auction mart. Shearers from New Zealand, France, The Falklands, Wales, Ireland, Scotland and England are all here, but the strong favourites are those who know best how to handle a Herdwick: farmers from the Lake District.

Time keepers ready, shearers ready, judges ready ... go!

It's a race against the clock. Six men lined up on stage grab a bulky Herdwick and clamp it between their legs. The shearers start under the chin, moving down the front, and skillfully work around the sheep to clear the entire fleece from the body, keeping it in

one piece. Seven judges scrutinise the process. Behind each shearer two men wait, bent down as if on their own starting blocks: one to take the clipped sheep, the other to pass the next sheep forwards for shearing. In front of them, a group of women clear away clippings and grab the fleeces, roll them as deftly as bakers twisting loaves, and throw them to waiting children who run around the back and throw the woolly packets into sacks.

And they're huffing and a-puffing, coming on round to the back leg now, really getting down to the nitty gritty these boys. Yeah he's got the best sheep left in the pen, down into the shoulder he goes, out to the hind leg. Got a good handle on that sheep, it's like a daddy long legs.

The room feels as if it should be a race track, but all the energy and movement is confined to the small stage and the whirring movement of shearers on sheep. The air is thick with the scent of lanolin, sheep excretions, warm bodies and the cloying summer heat.

Just watch him go, there he goes, shearing up the back bone, he makes that sheep look tiny. Awesome shearing!

In a frenetic blurring of sound and vision sheep after sheep is hauled onto the stage, manhandled, stripped, and passed off the stage. Sweat drips from the shearers' faces, bodies are moving in and out of focus as they run to gather wool, and noise levels rise, the tinny din of the commentary fighting against the chatter of the audience. Each competitor has to clip shearlings as well as twinters. A shearling has never been sheared – a thick dark brown coat needs to come off, and the sheep has no previous experience of being held this way. This is the toughest challenge, particularly for a farmer who's never handled a Herdwick.

After eight minutes and twenty seconds, the first of the shearers makes the final clip on his seventh sheep. He'll go through to the semi-finals and, at the end of the day, there will be a shear off, and the fastest shearer will be announced.

I meet a New Zealand shearer who's here on contracting business. He'll work on five farms this summer, but it's the first time he's taken part in the competition, and the first time he has sheared a Herdwick. 'I didn't do very well,' he says with a smile.

Even while I'm sitting down, my heart is racing. On stage, urgency is mixed with decisive, confident force. I've seen farmers being gentle with their sheep, almost tender in their firmness when they get a hold of them for a show or to get them from one place to the other, but here, keeping a dazed sheep as still as possible while trying to be the fastest shearer gives the process an edge of brutality, and it adds to the tension in the room.

The only member of the audience who seems oblivious to the heart-thumping pace is a small red-haired boy, around the age of four, who's holding a soft toy, a ram with spiral horns and tightly curled white wool. He is running a plastic shearer along its body in strong well-planned lines.

Behind the stage where the sheep gather after shearing, each one is lifted under the front legs for a judge to check. Then the sheep are let into a pen where they jostle and bleat, looking for a way out. I ask one of the judges what makes a good shear.

I'm looking for the neatness of the second cut.

I'm about to carry on talking to him when he's called away to check another sheep; I notice blood on it. Small cuts often happen but it's unusual for them to be deep. If this happens, they're seen to straight away.

Another group of shearers move onto the stage. Two local farmers, brothers whose strawberry blonde hair is cut in almost identical shaggy mullets; a pair of French men, tattooed and sporting goatee beards, long hair tied up; a Welsh man with grey stubble and massive paddle hands; a Falklander; and a Scot. They're all in jeans and each one is wearing the top that's the uniform for the competition: a black vest edged in red and printed with the white sheep's head emblem of the Lakeland Shearers. They all wear leather moccasins.

I step outside for some relief from the noise and meet a farmer from Lorton, about eight miles away. He's in his seventies, lanky, dressed in jeans and a checked shirt and has a small flock. He asks me if I farm and I tell him no, I'm a writer, and have come here today with two friends, one a weaver, one a sculptor. He mumbles that this is a bit 'old fashioned' and I wonder, really, whether either of us is more old fashioned than the other. I suspect that if it comes down to tradition, he's far more steeped in it than I am.

long summer days

the heat has burnt the blue from the sky
 a pale canvas for the play of swallows
 writing their place in the short summer of
 sultry air and the chatter of sparrows
 fills the morning yard

last night was too hot to sleep

this is not a time of lazing under leafy boughs
 no there are sheep to treat with bright blue
 that kills maggots and stains hands
 fleeces must be let loose in the fly-busy barn air
 and grass must be cut before the rain comes

long days roll together

last night the engine quietened at midnight
 after the third trailer-trip: ninety miles
 around the stubborn backs of fells
 to fetch sheep that strayed
 too far to be walked back

*the hefting system here is breaking
 slowly breaking down*

a thousand ewes on fenceless fells
 once stayed this side of the pass
 the neighbour's flock on the other
 holding invisible borders
 that hang in the balance

ease

there are days in Cumbria
when woollen hats are put to one side
waterproofs neglected
jumpers left empty
for days
the need for shade
met by wide-brimmed hats
and long light days
are a relaxed breath
of extra time that can be filled
with laughter

foxglove

buds are paws
pads in pink mittens
when the flower opens
as a tongue that tastes the bees
speaks a red code in dots and patches
like a map that shows urban growth
or the size of farms or floods
or species loss

the minutiae of life
hidden in soft skin
for only bees to see

showing

August

*This year was the best turn out of sheep we've had.
185 in total.*



For several months now I have kept my writing largely out of the field that I have been writing about. I have been a witness: observing, recording, and helping out as practically as possible, and have kept my notes to myself. But today is different. It is my turn to show something of what I have done. I am surprised at the nausea that's rising in me, and the difficulty I have had sleeping. I'm extremely nervous. I have been trusted to add something new to an event that is steeped in tradition.

The Matterdale and St John's Sheep Show follows a pattern that's as familiar and important as the fells that rise above the showground and this year, a poem I have written will be presented to the champions, imprinted on their rosettes. I feel enormously privileged to have been extended this amount of trust. One other show committee turned down my request out of concern that it wouldn't fit with tradition. I have been feeling the pressure for weeks: I want to complement the show, not detract from it. The poem will pass out of my hands and end up in farm kitchens: what I have written is not for me, it is for farmers to keep. I am eager that it underpins the pride that a rosette represents.

I don't know who is more apprehensive: me or the shepherds who have their eye on the championship this year. They will have carefully selected sheep to show, perhaps as long as a year ago, and will have spoilt them over the last few weeks. They will have given them a good wash and may even have preened the faces, plucking white hairs out of the black background to accentuate the eyes. While they've been doing this, I have been fine-tuning my own work.

Over the last few months I have been talking to farmers about the qualities they look for in a champion. In the process they've told me about previous champions, ewes and tups that were outstanding, and shows from the past. There is a heritage behind every champion, and a legacy going forward. In composing the poem I need to reflect this heritage, and write something that will stand strong in its separated parts, a couplet on each rosette.

A few days before the show I meet Jane, one of the committee, to collect the rosettes. She hands them to me with great care. They are fresh from the manufacturers. Each one is protected in its own clear wrapper, laid out with its long tassels flawlessly pressed. They are decorated in gold stars and twice as big as an average rosette: a dinner plate compared to a saucer. The thought of making any mistakes almost paralyses me and to add to the challenge, I have been given four rosettes instead of the three I had expected. I had assumed I would be given champion Herdwick, champion Swaledale and overall champion, but Jane explains that because the overall champion would already have won their own breed class, the decision had been made for the poetry to feature on the rosettes for champion and best opposite sex in each breed.

I drive back home with lines of poetry floating through my head over a vision of perfect, starred rosettes. When I arrive, my phone buzzes. A text shows up on the screen:

*It was lovely to meet u.
Thank you for doing the rosettes,
it is very kind and thoughtful.*

It's a gesture that not only alleviates my anxiety but changes the emphasis slightly. I begin to realise that this process is not just about me being given the honour of adding poetry to a rosette; the farmers also feel as if I am giving them something. This helps me

to refine the poem, and to do so with a deeper sense of gratitude and mutuality. Gratitude is a common thread in farming - though there are a few farmers who grumble more than others, I don't pick up a lot of arrogance or complacency. Perhaps this comes from working with the weather and a challenging economic climate, or from working with the land, or being part of a system of cycles repeated; or maybe gratitude and appreciation stem from being part of a network of farms and families that are deep rooted and frequently depend on one another.

The days have passed, I've amended the poem and had it printed onto the rosettes, and here I am now, standing in the marquee where every shepherd comes to register. Jane has taken the poem-rosettes out of their polythene packages. She is cooing over them, showing them to the woman next to her. I am not sure what to think and am rendered mute, all words held at the back of my throat.

There's a comradeship as people meet but there's also a tension in the show field between control, expectations, and surrender. You can prepare and prepare, and then you have to let go. There's something about this need to care a great deal and still keep an aspect of non-attachment that echoes the larger task of farming here: however much you try to control things, you and your flock will always be impacted by weather, markets, illness. You can attend to the finest details, but you don't know what might disturb things from day to day. There's a need for constant adaptation in order to fit as well as possible into the landscape, and meet changing social and economic pressures. This adaptability has underpinned the resilience of Cumbrian hill farming for centuries. I reflect on the uncanny way that the necessity of adaptation has come into the rosette poetry, which has been forced to alter its form and content to fit its environment as well as it can. It's even more noticeable with the other poem I have introduced: a poem for a cake.

For this, I have been speaking to women: some who take the lead role on the farm, some who work alongside their partners, and some who work off farm in unrelated jobs. I've asked them about their kitchens and I have composed a poem that incorporating their words.

I was going to bake the cake myself but one of the women I spoke to, Helen Rebanks, offered to bring one along: a firm favourite, a coffee cake. She has just arrived with it and I open the box to see what canvas I have to work with. I'm still nervous and my hand shakes as I cut the cake into as many slices as I can and squeeze a single word in black icing onto each space, selecting the words from the full poem as I go. I have talked this idea through with a few people involved with the show so I know that they approve, but I am apprehensive about imposing a poem onto everyone, and, more than this, offering it in a way that will return it, quite literally, back to its source. I wonder if anyone will want to eat it.

I place the cake on the table next to brownies, ginger breads and flap jacks and leave. I leave the full poem beside it.

Poem for a Cake

heart and hearth
 the family is the kitchen
 well used, well loved
 here time is eaten
 truths are spoken
 bread is broken
 beyond the window
 sheep, trees, fell



I sit down to tidy up the icing kit and notice a few people looking at the cakes, no doubt checking what's available for eating later – and glancing for longer at the poem. I overhear one comment:

*I'm not one for poetry but I like that, I like that, I really do.
 Yes, that is what my daughter would've said.*

I'm pleased to hear that the poem feels good, especially to someone who doesn't go in for poetry (and, to be honest, this is what most farmers have said to me). I'm reassured that what I have written has been received not with criticism for being presumptuous or ridiculous, but as something that feels as if it fits into a family. I relax a little.

With the marquee and the cake behind me, I stand against railings with the scent of sheep rising from the pens. I become part of slow conversations, commenting on the sheep, the weather, families, and mostly skirting around the central issue of the day: winning. I count through the classes: Tup lambs, shearling tups, old ewes, two-shear ewes, gimmer lambs, group of gimmers ... getting closer with each class to the judging of the champions. Every now and then I look back to the table where the cakes are laid to see if anyone has eaten any of the words.

When the sky darkens and rain begins to fall in rods, the judging is suspended. Bodies squeeze into the marquee, as close as penned sheep. I head into a trailer with several others; those still outside huddle under umbrellas. The rain drowns out conversations, and we stare through streaked air to the fells. When the rain passes as suddenly as it arrived the sun brings steam up from the drenched sheep and the judging recommences.

Back in the marquee, there are only three worded cake slices left:
 spoken / broken / bread.

With most of the cake gone there is another word revealed, a word that was neither part of the poem nor part of my plan; yet it fits. The plate has the word 'love' painted on it. In the process of expression this poem has, quite unexpected to me, found completion, just as it is disappearing.



The time for judging the champions has come. I have stopped chatting and stand as quiet and focused as the farmers who hold their sheep, their faces set, expressionless. I am conscious of the sheep but what I'm really watching is the bundle of rosettes which Jane is holding behind her back, ready to hand out.

I have no idea what the reaction will be to the addition of a poem – whether it will be welcomed, accepted with indifference, chided as graffiti on a long-awaited award, or scoffed at, as some form of 'art'. I wait while the judges mutter to one another.

When the Swaledale champion is announced, it goes to Peter Lightfoot for his tup. He smiles as he shakes the judge's hand and takes the rosette.

*Centuries past colour this blood,
carry poise, privilege, future lambs.*

I climb into the ring to congratulate Peter and give him an envelope with the full poem inside. He opens the envelope and as he reads out the poem, his voice is edged with pride and weighted with hard graft. Although Swaledale breeding is more typically linked with the Yorkshire Dales, Peter is one of the leading breeders at the moment. When he closes the gate on the pen, with his tup inside, he ties the rosette to the rails. The words, written in white, look fitting and the sun lights them up. On another pen, Robert Weir fixes the poem rosette he has been awarded for best opposite sex.

The Herdwick champion award is given to Peter Bland from Knott Houses. He's joined in the ring for photographs by his son Robert, and both are smiling and chatting to others when I go to talk to them.

*In this mouth: land, lineage, tales,
well-bred, weather-fed, triumph, time.*

I don't listen to Peter Bland reading the poem in full until I visit him a few weeks later on his farm, and he does so with the impression that he stands behind each one of the words he speaks. His rosette is on the wall in the kitchen, in line with the others he has won this year.

The award for best opposite sex in the Herdwick class goes to Jean Wilson, who is one of the most senior breeders as well as one of the best; she won last year's championship. Later in the month I sit with her in her house and she reads her couplet back to me. Her chocolate brown hogs graze in the field beside the house. The far reaching view takes in the ridges of fells that rise above the showground beyond them.

As Jean reads, she changes a couple of the words: instead of *poise*, she reads *pauses*; and where I have written *lineage*, she reads *lingers*. The changes are entirely fitting, and I'm enjoying the process of this poem's evolution. It now exists in four parts with hills, valleys, woods, rocks, becks, waterfalls and weather as part of its makeup, and its content has a fluidity, adapting depending on where it is and how it is spoken.

There's a home-coming for the words on the rosettes as they settle into a ruffled landscape of stories and layered time marked with traditions that are far older than this show: droving routes, trees that have stood for hundreds of years and open land whose woodland ghosts survive as wood sorrel, harts tongue fern, aconite and other tell-tale species. Perhaps the most obvious sign of tradition is the network of walls, scribed into the land in lines and curves that cross streams and flank waterfalls, embrace trees, ride over boulders the size of houses, and in places tackle slopes too steep to walk without the use of hands. They offer a map of tasks and time that remains relatively unchanged since the mid-nineteenth century. A good dry stone wall, made by hand and without any cement or mortar, is expected to last at least a hundred years. Many walls trace lines first laid down five or even eight hundred years ago, mended again and again as weather and stock break them down.

Later in the month when I spend a day with farmers fixing a wall gap I work with stones that have passed through generations of hands, and I become part of a gentle rhythm maintaining a tradition that, like most practical farming tasks, is rooted in necessity: the walls are not for show, they are there to keep sheep in. If every stone in a wall were a word, each wall would be a story, every fell a library. The news that one of the farmers is leaving the valley is a strong reminder, though, that walls and stones, or even words, do not hold heritage: it is people that do this.

The words that I iced onto the cake at the show no longer have a physical place; they had only a brief appearance as a playful part of the farming year, and have become absorbed, a memory. They are a small part of the narrative that persists over time, shared in the chatter over the backs of sheep in yards, at shows, and around the table after a gather.

Poem for Rosettes I
Matterdale & St John's Sheep Show, 2015
(original)

Centuries past colour this blood,
carry poise, privilege, future lambs.

This strong body: fell-scented stock,
far-sighted, held in skillful hands.

In this mouth: land, lineage, tales,
hill-bred, weather-fed, triumph, time.

These firm legs: deep-rooted here,
fine fettle, well-hefted, pride in line.

Poem for Rosettes II
Matterdale & St John's Sheep Show
(rearranged according to the order of awards
and content changed when read aloud by recipients)

Centuries past colour this blood,
carry pauses, privilege, future lambs.

These firm legs: deep-rooted here,
fine fettle, well-hefted, pride in line.

In this mouth land lingers, tales,
hill-bred, weather-fed, triumph, time.

This strong body: fell-scented stock,
far-sighted, held in skillful hands.

gathering

September

*We have to gather on foot, because there's no way you'll
gather with a quad bike. There is nothing that will change.
In five hundred years' time if it is all surviving,
it won't be any different.*



Our ascent from Brockstones is fast: heads down, thighs moving, our feet finding holds in mud, bog, scree and rock. When we stop at Shipman's Knott, about 1000 feet up, I'm short of breath but Ivan, who's in his seventies, has calmly turned his gaze toward the head of the valley. He's scouring the land for sheep. I look to the expanding view to the south, the dog-leg shape of Windermere and the haze of Morecambe Bay beyond, while we wait for Hannah and a few other farmers, who have driven around the nub of the fell on a quad bike. When she reaches us, we are seven people and thirteen dogs.

I perch onto the quad behind Hannah and we bump along the whale-back ridge of Kentmere Pike, the valley falling away beneath us and the sky larger and larger as we gain height. The yellowed grass is being blown sideways and it seems to throw sunlight back into the air.

It's not long before the way is no longer passable on the quad. Another farmer, George, takes the quad back down hill to cover the lower patch of land and we're back on our feet. We're following sheep, not paths. We walk at speed and often at sharp angles, across scree, beneath crags, and over becks. I keep up with Hannah who, like all the farmers I have joined on gathers, glides across the land with a confidence and ease that comes from a lifetime on these fells. Eyes up, feet sure, the way led by the sheep and the task of bringing them in. The grey-white sheep can look just like stones and we squint against the sun to identify them among the grey outcrops, gullies and boulders that rise like islands from a sea of green. Hannah points out which is which, and from a distance can also tell which ones are hers.

*Rough fells? They're nice yes, but all the sheep are pretty aren't they? I tell you,
they feel big when they hit you in the legs. That one there,
that's a Herdwick-cross off a Rough Fell.*

Soft light teases shadows from receding lines of ridged fells, and turns the tarns black like sudden holes in the land. I become entranced, not just by the land, but by once again being part of a gather. This is where it is: the art, the spirit and the pulse of shepherding in the Lakeland fells. Bringing in the sheep from the vast upland commons has a gentle simplicity, even though the task is demanding and complex. There is grace and there is speed, we need precision and looseness, and success depends on the close relationship between people, dogs, sheep and the land, and the action of doing it time and time again. Sheep are gathered in again and again through the year. Hefted sheep have particular places they tend to go, routes they follow when they're urged down from the heights into the valley, and there are always some that try to turn back. Farmers know their sheep and they know their hefts in intimate detail, just as they know the way the sky tells of coming weather; this is what it is to ken the land and being part of it lends me, for a time, a body-felt sense of the land and the vibrant tension between myself, this place, the sheep, the dogs and a driving force of tradition and heritage. This stuff cannot be found in books.

We are all up high, spread out, a scattering of lone figures on fell tops separated by steep drops and vast glacier-scraped bowls. It's as if we're standing on giant motionless waves, like fishermen at the edge points of a net, drawing together slowly, bringing the catch in.



From time to time we rest to stretch our gaze and check for sheep, and there is a chance to chat. Hannah is concerned about the severe reduction in sheep numbers on a neighbouring farm where the decision has been taken to reduce grazing pressure on the land; the intention is to allow an increase in biodiversity, improve the chance for trees to grow, and maximise the ability of the wet and boggy moss-covered fells to store water, and carbon. With numbers falling to the north, Hannah's sheep are tending to flow beyond their usual limits with ever greater regularity. They spill over the lip of Nan Bield Pass lured by shelter from the wind and grass that is richer now that fewer sheep are nibbling it. If the sheep go too far for the Dickinsons to gather them in on foot, they have to be gathered by trailer, load by load, in a ninety-mile round-trip. With the time that takes, and the cost of diesel, it's one of many issues that add strain to the daily task of farming and heighten concern for the future.

It's getting harder to gather em in, the hefting system's breaking down. Problem is, when it's gone, it's gone.

We spot sheep in groups of three or four. The dogs cajole them and drive them downwards, and we follow. It's a gradual process. As I stride high on the ridge, looking down to Haweswater and the forests crawling up the hill from the water's edge, I feel a sense of timelessness. Here we are, a simple collection of men and women with sticks and dogs, gathering sheep: this is the way it has been done for centuries. The melodic sound of whistles, whoops and shepherds' calls drift on a light wind, overlaid with bleats of sheep. I am tied in with the wind, the high ridges, the search for sheep, the chase of the dogs and a neat cooperation between shepherds.

*Jess, Jess,
That'll do, that'll do*

Hannah squints in the sun as she scans the hillside and chats, frequently breaking to call to her dogs with a yell. We stay high, another farmer flows downhill with a red crook in his hand and several dogs zig-zagging around him. Where the land sinks like a giant thumb print, filled with the ruffled waters of a tarn, he drives sheep out of clefts, back towards the valley. Our quick steps, together with our small selves, are dots against the vast sweep of these fells, specks in shifting light.

*Fly, Fly, Come in, Come in.
Fly, Fly.*

Gradually the sheep are gathered downhill from crevices and summits. It takes us a little over two hours to bring them all from the higher land and the pace changes. Everyone works together. We're all shouting at dogs and sheep, using our arms, sticks and crooks to persuade sheep to turn and move, and scurrying occasionally to drive back any that have disappeared down rough outcrops or into thigh-high bracken. The sheep prefer to be high, and some make a dash for it when they see the opportunity. But we work on, and at last a glut of more than three hundred - Rough Fells, Swaledales, Herdwicks and a few crosses - are butting up against a gate, on the final stretch towards the farm.

At the end of the gather my thighs are hurting and my mouth is dry but inside I feel as bright as the sky and utterly alive. While the sheep are sorted, Margaret turns up with cups of tea, sandwiches and cake. Hannah's children clamber around the rocks beside the path and hang onto the gate. I walk back to the house with the boys, leaving the other adults to sort the sheep in readiness for the next task.

gathered time

watching for rocks my breath tugging me uphill
eyes on the fells on the sheep on the dogs
feet doing the thinking

I am gathered into the land I gather the land in
map it in my body each ridgeline each step
each sight a memory deep as wombscent
imprinted the stone of a crag
the wind on a ridge the clatter of feet
racing down scree

it is simple
and it is far from simple
this being with land
this fetching of flocks

land passed down through hands
geology in bones

hands

bent fingers are events
time spelt in form
grip on a horn
feedbag hauled from the floor
slam of a gate

do hands get bigger the harder they work?
tightness around the knife
that scrapes the rotted hoof
or sightless, probes the wet of womb
and makes a quick cut of cords
skinning of the dead

and softer with the gentle things?
deep warmth of wool
the curl round a crook
cradling your baby

skin earthed brown maps tasks in lines
rain washed lanolin smooth
each nail tip a curve of black
dark stuff of a day's work
matter from the yard
as if to underline

in hands : land
in land : hands

heart and hearth

each wall crag and trod
beneath the unmovable skyline
grows from roots in the kitchen
with kettle warm, clothes drying, food cooking
and chairs pulled round a table piled with paperwork

every step in this valley
to move the flock
to gather them in
to set them out
to check lambs

all these steps on the fells
drawn back, as if by a magnet
with the kitchen
as its pull

so lines of wellies by the back door
are twinned with sphagnum moss,
and furrowed brows and cups of tea
blend with crags where peregrines play



Epilogue

At the end of two years with farmers and the process of developing my own work, it is now possible to reflect on what has arisen: both what I have learnt, and how I have presented this.

In my introduction, I discussed a history of literature that over-sentimentalises the Lake District National Park as a place, and whose content and form romanticise hill farming, or eulogise it as a culture that is passing away. My experiences alongside hill farmers proved neither of these viewpoints to be an absolute truth, yet both do come through in my writing.

This is a consequence of a paradox that has continued for centuries: on the one hand, there is the resilience of farming in the midst of a landscape of fells and valleys that is immutable; and on the other hand, there are threats to traditional farming, and farmers frequently talk to me about reductions in sheep numbers, closure of farms and their concerns about the break-down of the hefting system. There is a persistence as well as a struggle; constancy as well as change. There is a second paradox: that beauty and harshness can exist in the same space. All these elements have stimulated a style of writing that contains both romantic and raw language, and neat form as well as form that is uncontained by a page.

My writing has evolved to contain these paradoxes: it offers an expression of continuity as well as an unpredictable future; it presents idyllic representations of natural scenes as well as the pragmatic aspects of farming. Furthermore, my choice of form embodies the landscape and the farming practices that take place within it – not by harking back to a past described by other writers or by projecting forward to an imagined future (although these are acknowledged), but primarily by drawing on present-day experiences, observations and voices. Farming is an evolving practice, emerging and creating itself from day to day, to fit as well as it can in its environment, responding to changes as they arise. The poetry in this thesis reflects the complexity of upland farming as well as its resilience and its evolution, with an ability to contain paradoxes and unpredictability, to remain rooted in traditions, and yet still move forward.

Within ten minutes
The ewe is grazing again
Calling her new-born lamb
To stiffen its hinges,
To come and ease her udder.
Already they are practising
Their recognition signals,
The particular bleat and smell,
Printing the map,
The trods to be followed.

From *Imprinted* by Tom Rawling

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