

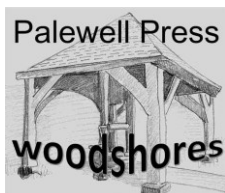
An extract from “The Soil Never Sleeps”

# THE SOIL NEVER SLEEPS

Poetry from a Year on Four British Farms

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Illustrated by Jo Sanders



## *I Believed I Understood the Land*

I believed I understood the land once, long ago,  
a child running in his mother's footsteps, who gleaned  
the names of birds that burst from the hedgerow,

who pulled up solid fronds of fern that leaned  
out into his path to be sword and ploughshare,  
imagined toys that soiled his hands and greened

the valley sunlight as he caught foxes unaware  
when they bolted home across the failing pasture  
spilled out below his house. I would not dare,

now, to say I knew anything of land. It has no master;  
only people who strive to learn and understand  
the minutes of it, and the hours. The earth moves faster

than we can comprehend, so seek a segment, find a strand  
of it that you can love. Listen to the movement in one hedge.  
Attune to it. See what it will give. Make no demand.

If you've listened, you'll know we're balanced on the edge  
between oblivion and life and that the only charm  
for our salvation comes in the moments when we pledge

to do no lasting damage, cause as little harm  
as we can manage in field or office, city street or farm.

## *You'll Find Your Way*

There's steam rising from the road  
as we ride the quad bike  
up narrow lanes between fence-topped  
walls to the gate out onto Pikedaw.

I cling on hard, perched like a parrot  
behind Neil, the dogs racing us as we  
pass the erratic downward flow of tractors,  
hikers and tourists in polished cars.

*You know the grass is growing  
when tarmac steams,  
shouts Neil over his shoulder.  
It's warm and wet. The perfect time!*

We slide upward through moisture  
rising to meet thin strips of white  
clawed across a seam of blue.  
I raise my face to watch the sun.

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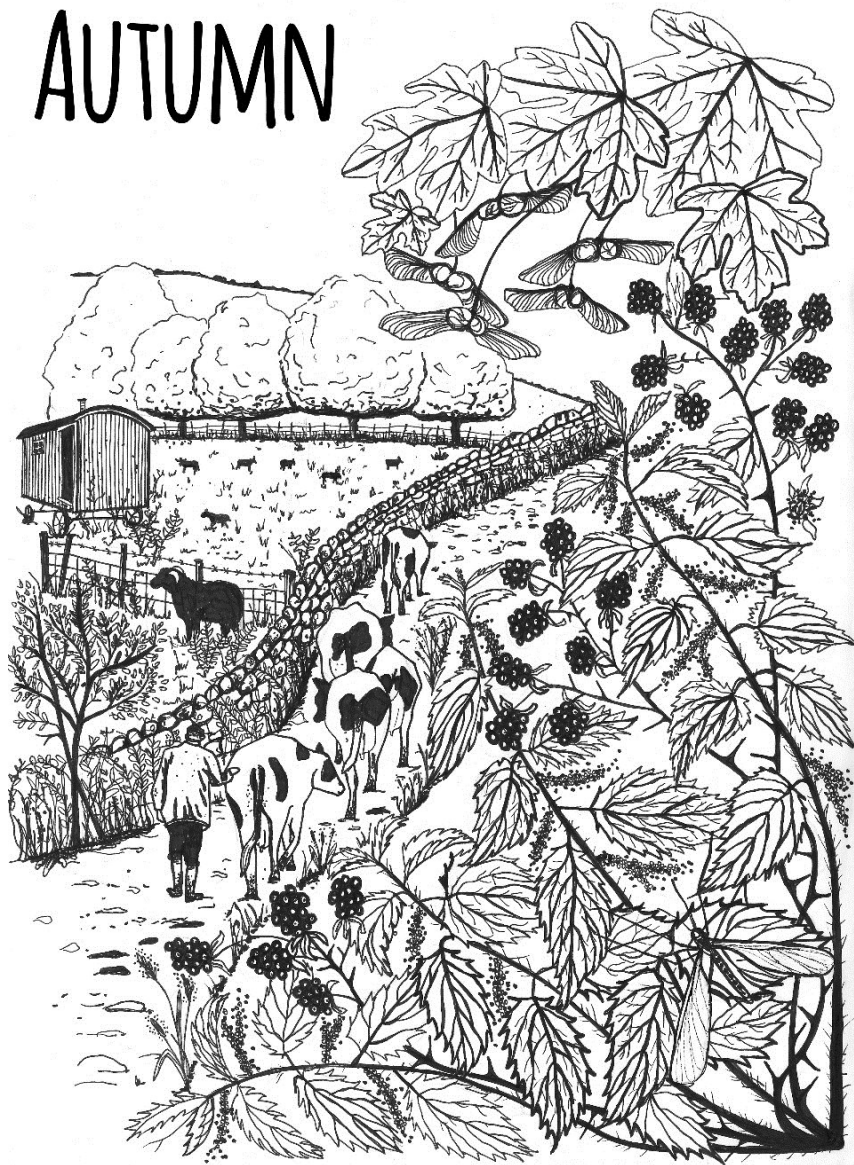
Beyond the gate, the quad bike  
bucks and shifts on rough lanes  
between rocks like a circus bronco.  
I won't be thrown. Knuckles white

against my plywood seat, I twist  
to the tune of Pikedaw. A grim  
laugh bursts from my lips.  
*You alright?* asks Neil.

*You know, I'm the first farmer  
in a millennium not to farm this land  
on foot. I'm two stone heavier  
than my father was, at the same age as me.*

At the peak, Neil points out  
a steep incline down through rocks.  
*The farmhouse is down there.  
Follow the walls. You'll find your way.*

# AUTUMN



## *On the Bridleway*

Cows dawdle out onto the green lane  
slow as tipsy teenagers all too aware  
of the hours to fill before Friday night  
steps up a gear. They gossip as they wander  
through Samuel Palmer paintings, nose  
into the ivied windows of the verge to brush off  
flies, gathered at their eyes like clubland bling.

The heavy sweat of morning rises as steam  
into glitter-ball clusters of blackberries  
as high hedgerows flicker from red to blue  
through a multitude of abstracted greens.  
Cattle bell for calves caught in the undergrowth,  
full of grass and stiff-limbed forgiveness,  
tolerate Matthew's call and whistle, the wolfish  
sheepdog's relentless pinch at their heels.

Stones turn beneath our feet, hoof-loosened.  
We dance an avoidance dance as we follow the herd  
down this shit-streaked bridleway. With the sun's  
shift, we move from Palmer country into the Chagall-scape  
shade of a crab apple tree, the cows a canvas of muscle,  
heads dipped in pursuit of windfalls  
which they snuffle up like pills.

## *First Mist*

The glut of grass and herbs at summer's end  
is waxed into the cattle's hides, which shine  
like new-washed table tops. The sun's a blend  
of mist, leaf-shadow. A dust of rain, fine

as silk, that turns pasture slick beneath hoof  
and foot. The grey, close cloud sucks at solar  
panels, then consumes them. Nothing is proof  
against its descent. Monochrome stole a

march on morning with its subtle fingers;  
grey suffuses grey until nothing's left.  
Only the still and dew-fringed herd lingers,  
visible, pushing at the fence like weft

ready for the electric wire's warp, its purr,  
late grasses still ripening as the seasons slur.

## *Spoils*

Cattle come running  
to the hum of the quad bike,  
the promise of hay sweeter  
than this tired winter grass.

Here, at the top of the field,  
in the cold rise above the farm  
where the wind sits heavy  
on the sun's shine,  
grass grips close to soil.

Brambles flail over the fence lip.  
Combs of bracken are pressed  
into oblivion by eager hooves.  
We have lured the bullocks here

away from the softer curves  
of the farm's lower reaches.  
The hay hurled from the trailer  
is a bribe for their trampling,  
a tribute. No weedkiller here.

The land fulfils itself  
under the pressure of hooves  
despite the old spaniel with a mucky eye,  
keen to guard the bracken,



barking and feinting rash challenges  
to the cows as they rip hay apart  
with limber tongues, test  
their nascent horns brother on brother  
in glass-eyed hunger games.

Today they are grass-starved demi-gods,  
these bullocks, manoeuvred and conditioned  
by greed into keeping down stray weeds.  
All that spoils the pasture, corrupts the soil.

## *Three Options for Farmers*

Go up into the land beyond the plough  
where a sheep's worst enemy  
is other sheep, where the Beltie herd  
roams as free as the jawbone walls  
that map the centuries on Yorkshire's Dales  
allow. Yes, here. Go here. The land  
loses its man-made maps without animals,  
without people huddling through a cold winter,  
learning how to fail and fail better  
together, dreaming of a landscape  
that lives in symbiosis  
with money and with love.

Or go down into the Southern valleys  
to unblock drains that bleed brown  
when the rains come heavy, to stop  
the very best of the fields from running off  
to make war with cars and roads.  
Go out and sing with the corncrakes at dusk  
in the spaces you have made for them,  
sacred in their stillness,  
in the deceptive silence of abundant growth.

Or, perhaps, go into the towns and cities  
laden with produce and stories,  
your tongues ripe with carefully  
disguised science, the bare  
bone facts dressed in the muscle  
of myth and memory.  
Too much fact runs off busy people  
like water from compacted soil.  
Learn how to open them  
to the seeds of ideas.

Water them with stories.

Watch them grow.