

CHAPTER I

I Take This Field

*Soil. Earth. Dirt.
Call it what you will, it's the element
of agriculture, of farmland . . .*

I WAS EARLY. A parent being early is as useless as a parent being late, but it was only when I checked the texted directions on my phone that I realized it said '2', not '12', for post-sleeper pick-up. What to do for two hours while I waited to prove my paternal reliability and save her teenage embarrassment? I was near British Camp on the Malvern Hills, those dinosaur-spine eruptions into the cultivated English Eden, and it was years since I'd last been up, so up I went, blue coat flapping like a sheet on the line. Edward Elgar lived close by for a decade, so 'Nimrod' played loud in the air as I ascended to the Iron Age fortress.

Breathless, at the top I sat down for the view, which in another way took my breath away. Laid out, as in the view from an aeroplane window, was Herefordshire,

the whole of it, to the Black Mountains in the west, the shining Wye to the south, the Clee Hills to the north.

This is my heartland. Once, my London-born wife asked me to mark on a map everywhere my family, both paternal and maternal lines, have been born. From here I can see every place for the last eight hundred years. She laughed, but kindly, with the appreciation of someone whose own family have wandered.

It was warm in the August sun and I was tired, so I lay down in a hollow and fell to drowsy dreaming:

Dream I

A memory, actually, from some time in the 1970s, I can't be sure when, but before the river of life hit the dividing rock of exams, when some went one way, the rest elsewhere:

I finger-toe climb the gappy stone wall behind my grandparents' house in Herefordshire (going through the gate would be no Everest adventure) into the wheat-field. The cereal is gold and heavy-headed, the evening sun blood-red, the scene a Stalinist painting of promised-land plenty. I start pushing through the rows of the crop; since I am small and the wheat tall (wheat was dwarfed soon afterwards so it did not bend under the weight of chemical sprays) I can hold my arms aeroplane-like and skim the hard heads with flat hands to achieve equilibration. There is a slight wind in the wheat; my hands and the breeze make sibilance.

Above me, and in fancy, swallows are Spitfires wheeling and diving.

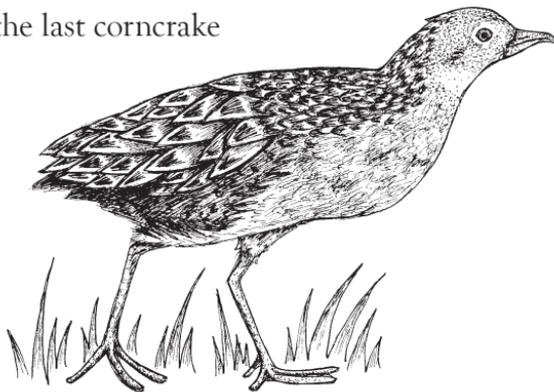
I stumble, look down, and put away the childish game. There are poppies and cornflowers and corn marigolds weaved through the cornstalks; and in the bare earth circle, where the seed drill faltered, a cowering grey bird.

I know what it is instantly, because I have spent days poring over bird books, trying to identify the bird making the comb-scraping noise. I've asked my grandparents; 'Rail,' they said, but to me a rail was the moorhen on the farm pond. Finally I had twigged. They meant landrail, or corncrake. The bird with the onomatopoeic Latin name: *Crex crex*.

The corncrake evanesces. Perhaps for a tenth of a second our eyes had met; a lifetime, in other words. Wordsworth once wrote of 'spots of time', experiences so intense they expand and inform existence ever after. They have a 'renovating virtue'.

In that cornfield I looked into the eyes of what was probably the last corncrake in Herefordshire.

I have never forgotten you, corncrake.



I WOKE UP WITH a guilty start from the day-dreaming, thinking I had slept too long, and scabbled for my phone but found I had only catnapped for minutes. I looked again at the view, at the immense spread of fields, a water-colour paintbox of solid blocks of green and gold. There is a pleasant land before me, but I know when I descend into those fields they are silent, sterile, open-roofed factories for agribusiness. Units of production.

At this point, full disclosure: I farm.

I change the subject in my head to something more agreeable and get in touch with my inner teenage Eng Lit student. Somewhere on these same slopes, William Langland, the fourteenth-century poet, had his character Will fall ‘into a slepyng’ and meet a spiritual guide, Piers Plowman, who showed him a vision of a just society. I wonder where on the slopes exactly Will slumbered?

I must have dozed off again . . .

Dream II

Piers Plowman is holding the reins of oxen while declaiming to a group of snaggle-toothed peasants about a good society. I am at the back, taller than the rest, leaning over . . . and he points at me . . . then I see myself back in the cornfield with the corncrake but now I’m middle-aged . . .

I'M WIDE, WIDE awake now. There is no sophisticated, writerly way to put this: I have had a gutsful of chemical farming. If the chemicals dousing the land are so fantastically safe, why do crop-sprayers have sealed cabs? By law, specifically European normative 15695-1:2009, the carbon filtration system on a crop-sprayer must be 99 per cent efficient in preventing any ingress into the cab of toxic dust and vapours. If pesticides and herbicides are dangerous to farmers, they are dangerous. Period.

Now I've got a vision of my own. Piers ploughed in order to ameliorate society's evil. Why don't I take a modern, conventionally farmed arable field, plough it, and husband it in the old-fashioned, chemical-free way, and make it into a traditional wheatfield? Bring back the flowers that have all but disappeared from British ploughlands, such as corncockle, Venus's looking-glass, shepherd's needle, corn marigold and the cornflower, with its bloom as brilliant as June sky? And the birds and animals that loved such land - grey partridges, quail, harvest mice.

And hares. Could I entice in a hare? A corncrake is an impossibility because they are extinct in England except for a small introduced colony in Cambridgeshire. But perhaps I could manage a hare.

Such is the vision of John the Plowman.

There is a problem. We farm in the hills of the far distance under the black wall of Wales, where nothing but grass and sheep grow. I need to find an arable field. A field to plough to grow crops.

Another confession: I grew up with arable farming.
And I miss it so.

*The moon lies back and reddens.
In the valley a corncrake calls
Monotonously,
With a plaintive, unalterable voice, that deadens
My confident activity;
With a hoarse, insistent request that falls
Unweariedly, unweariedly,
Asking something more of me,
Yet more of me.*

D. H. Lawrence, from 'End of Another Home Holiday'

BUT NOBODY WANTS to rent me an arable field to turn into a traditional wheatfield. I advertise, I tweet, I put up cards in village shops from Ross to Ledbury.

There is the problem of taking a field out of crop rotation, there is the bigger problem of the 'W' word. As soon as I mention, to the handful of bites that I do get, that I wish to sow wildflowers in with the wheat I get the same response: 'Those are weeds, they might contaminate our crop.'

One arable farmer of my acquaintance is more succinct still; I'm on my egg delivery round (we have free-range chickens, lots of free-range chickens . . . Light Sussex, Cream Legbars, Araucanas, Marans, Minorcas,

Wyandottes, Speckledys, Barnevelders, Warrens, Old English Game) on the narrow back lane at Wormbridge when I have to slow the Land Rover down to pass an oncoming black Nissan Warrior 4x4, which is only slightly bigger than a battleship. I wind down the window, we chat for a moment, I pop the arable field question, he replies: 'Weeds? You want weeds? I'll show you some f***** weeds . . .'

Eventually, through a friend of ours, Joanna, I'm put in touch with Philip Miller, an advertising executive, who owns some land at St Weonards in south Herefordshire. 'He's a keen birdwatcher,' says Joanna.

A decade ago, on a fancy, Phil Miller bought a three-acre wood; with the woodland came three fields, two permanent pasture, one arable, plus a derelict cottage garden. He lives in St Albans, and rents the fields out. The present tenancy ends in December. Eventually, after some haggling, I take on all the land, fifteen acres in total, on a two-year Farm Business Tenancy. Little of this is ideal, and the least-good aspect is that I can only have wildflowers in the arable field for a year. After that, I have to put the field down to grass.

One year. One opportunity.

THE FIELD HAS a name: Flinders, after an owner of long ago, so I am told. It is four acres in extent, now crammed with kale for livestock to eat in situ. (I have to buy the pert green forage from the last tenant.) Winter comes

out in January's false sunshine as I walk around the edge of my new, if temporary, possession, mapping the field in my head.

The field is almost square, crew-cut hedges on three sides, wire stock fence on the other, a bit of ditch underneath this; the ditch then 'dog-legs' to run deep under the western hedge and is swollen thick with red topsoil running off Flinders and the twenty-acre wheatfield belonging to next door. A few spavined nettles hang over the silt snake, a fern or two cling to the ditch side. At first glance, Flinders is a disappointment, an unremarkable field, featureless, an *ager rasmus*.

Gnats vortex in the untimely heat. A gang of discordant jackdaws plays some juvenile game in the sky. Otherwise the field is silent; a mausoleum with invisible walls and roof.

I walk around the field again, and peer closer, at everything: the kale, the ditch, the hedges, the two-foot grass margin, muted by winter, which edges the field in a hairy fawn frame. In the west hedge, two trees, alders, have recently been felled, sawdust splattered everywhere. Why? Probably because they were shading the crop. This is a field without a single tree in the hedges. In the top, northwest corner sits a pleasantly stubborn elm stump, sufficiently into the field that the kale is forced to swerve around it.

'Tram tracks', the wheel marks from a crop-sprayer, are ghost lines in the kale. Once upon a time the countryside was criss-crossed by roads, paths and bridleways;

the new tracks across the landscape are guides for machinery.

At second glance, Flinders is a greater disappointment still. As I close the gate behind me, a crop-sprayer trundles past. You may see a fine day; a conventional farmer sees a day to go a-spraying with 'a post-emergence herbicide'.

Only in one respect is Flinders unusual: it is a runt of an arable field. The fields next to it are twenty acres minimum.

I suppose the wide open landscape south and east towards Ross is pleasant enough, as it rises and falls in long swells, and spires of poplar somewhat disrupt the regularized grid of big fields, which replicates endlessly into the eastern distance. In the unseasonal sun alders along a far brook appear as a port-wine stain.

You know how squinting enables you to see a pixelated picture clearly? On some inexplicable impulse I narrow my eyes at the view, and for a passing second I see the faint indentations in the earth where hedges were before the great sixties rip-up. I see the beautiful past.

The farmer-politician William Cobbett travelled this way in 1821 on his *Rural Rides* and averred: 'Everything here is good, arable land, pastures, orchards, coppices, and timber trees, especially the elms, many scores of which approach nearly to a hundred feet in height.'

The elms are long gone; the orchards too. But Cobbett was right; the heavy clay land, given a chance,

likes plants and trees to grow upon it. Following the last ice age the earth here gave rise to thick oak forests, and the area's first farmers, the Neolithic people, began their arable farming by wearily cutting down the oaks with their polished axes to make small allotments. Humans have been growing food here for five thousand years. It is small wonder, I think, that the word *human* and the word *humus*, meaning 'soil', come from the same root in Proto-Indo-European, the ancestral language of the Indo-European family. That root is *(dh)ghomon*, meaning 'earthly being'. The Hebrew *adam*, meaning 'man', is from *adamah*, ground.

We live off the earth, and when we die we go back to it. To add to the *humus*.

Within a mile to the west of Flinders the hills begin, and the roads worsen. 'God help us' is the Herefordshire saying about the village of Orcop, partly in relation to the potholed primitiveness of its lanes, partly because it is the first village of the Welsh Borders, that dubious, disputed edgeland.

Flinders is within, by ten clod's throws, the arable Midlands, safe within the pale of civilization. The Romans were here, the Saxons too. Neither of them much fancied the dark wet hills and the Welsh.

Farming is about rain. For arable farming, one needs twenty-five or so inches of rain per annum; thirty-five inches is too much. Up in the mountains where we live, the year's rainfall can easily top fifty sodden inches.

Go west, young man? Hardly. In Herefordshire if

you had made money you progressed eastwards, to the good, dry lands. It is not just a trick of my memory that my 1970s childhood in east Herefordshire was golden; it was actually, physically, meteorologically 50 per cent drier than where I now live, though the distance across the surface of the planet is just twenty miles.

I once contemplated a small hop yard on our hill farm, calculating that I had enough farmyard manure (FYM in the jargon, FYI) to nourish the soil and those sky-seeking hungry bines. 'You'll never sustain it, John,' said Leslie Rees, our neighbouring farmer and knocking on the door of seventy-five. He was right, of course, because he had come from Stretton Sugwas in the east of the county as a farm labourer, and worked (and worked again) to become a farmer and set his own four sons up. You could do that as late as the 1990s, before the City boys started to speculate in agriculture. Gold down? Land up!

Leslie was right. The damp would have blighted the hops, plagued them with mould. I knew it too, because my maternal grandfather was a hop farmer at Much Cowarne. Among my earliest memories is being in a winter hop yard, helping headscarved women pull down the brittle dead bines from towering wires. The bines were put on a ceaseless bonfire; lunch was a potato baked in the ashes.

To have my own hop yard was a dream, just a dream. For years I thought my longing for hops was about the personal sanctuary of childhood, that time before

bills and responsibility; and then one toss-turny night I revisited the hop yard of memory, stood in the middle of the place, and swivelled the full 360 degrees. I saw past the people and the wooden pillars to the birds. There were coveys of grey partridge scuttling through.

As I climb into the Land Rover cab, I glance north. The view is blocked by the heavily wooded Aconbury Hill where my father's family, who were Norman come-latelies, started farming in 1450. I cannot escape the shadow of the past, and I do not wish to.

On the drive home, I keep running the word 'Flinders' around my head. Does it not mean something?

Then there is the weather: like others who work land, I am prone to believing folkloric adages. Science works wonderfully in an electric-lit laboratory; the real world is less test-tube certain. It is never a good omen in farming if January begins warm.

January, eh? 'The blackest month in all the year / Is the month of Janiveer.'

ON 4 JANUARY I ship sheep over to Flinders to eat the kale. Backwards and forwards with the Land Rover and trailer, until I've sixty sheep in the field, a 'mob stock' to eat the forage down so I can plough when the weather turns right. Overnight the weather has gone to ice so of course the heater in the cab of the Land Rover breaks

down en route. I pull our Jack Russell terrier across my lap as a hot-water bottle.

Sheep: won't go into a trailer, and once in won't go out. I enter through the 'jockey door' to push the last three black Hebridean ewes out, slip over in the effluent so my blue Dickies boiler suit, which is the farmer's one-sie, is soaked in ovine urine. Hebrideans have the devil's horns and it is with an evil grin that they bounce away.

After unloading these last sheep from the trailer, I begin a cadastral survey: I take stock of the local state of nature by having a nosey wander along the lane, which is thin and slick with red mud from tractors and field run-off. The Far East had a Silk Road; this region of Western farming has a Silt Lane.

A flint wind, no good for man or beast, cuts in from the east, so I hug the near hedge, which shivers naked and is no comfort at all. Magpies, those proofs of desolation, flap beside me. Magpies were not created, they were manufactured in some fantastical factory; after the nuclear winter, there will still be magpies clacking, still be magpies on dubious missions borne by mechanical wings.

There is a constant stream of outsize JCB Fastrac tractors, requiring me to walk on the verge. Only one thing outdoes the yellow brightness of the Fastracs: the green of winter wheat pumped by artificial fertilizer, which creeps across the land in a low neon vapour.

A pebble handful of wood pigeons is thrown by the wind across the sky; a fat tick of a grey squirrel, stuffed

with acorn or mast, grips the trunk of an oak, and indolently watches me pass. In fifteen minutes of walking I've seen magpies, a squirrel and wood pigeons. My ears are overfull with the seashell noise of wind, and the diesel bass of £60,000 super-tractors.

Then, a comma in the loud sentence of my perambulating: three-quarters of a mile to the south, there is a farm that hosts a game shoot. 'Thorneycroft' says the wooden laneside sign in scooped-out letters. Think what you like about game shooting, this farm has biodiversity; there is ground cover and there is food. In a field of spiky maize stubble I count twenty red-legged partridges. Dumpy, clownish-bright, they are a warming sight; next to the maize spears is a patch of white millet with a thousand bouquets of seeds, and these twing and twang with goldfinches and chatty house sparrows. Five little yellowhammers fly in.



I walk back into the monotone scene, past Flinders, and along the lane to the north. A blackbird has been spread-flattened into the road, pressed into the ooze. A car coming round the bend fish-tails on the mud. The driver gives me a resigned, apologetic half-wave.

After a mile, I reach a dairy farm. The roadside

yard is clinically smart, as befits modern health and safety, but I cannot help but notice that around the back of one of the steel-framed barns is an overgrown paddock full of bits of scrap.

All farms used to have an untidy corner where machinery went to die, and where thistles and nettles grew. Intensive farming has all but done away with these little no-man's-land nature reserves; modern farms are as obsessively tidy as showroom Hygena kitchens. I walk on, and see in the entrance to a field that a new pond has been excavated, the raking scrapes from a digger's bucket visible in the clay.

Here, then, is a farm with a commitment to conservation. Exactly as this thought sparks across the synapses, there occurs the strangest of synchronicities: an evidential jack hare runs, with the rocking-chair gait peculiar to the species, down the lane towards me.

He stops, and glares with golden eyes. Hares have the chiselled head of horses, the legs of lurchers - and the eyes of lions; the ancient Chinese considered the animal so other-worldly they decided its ancestor lived in the moon.

The hare, now up on hind legs, cock-eared, continues to look at me, unblinking. The Middle English poem 'The Names of the Hare' gives seventy-two synonyms for hare; they include, with the accuracy that comes from accumulated communal knowledge, 'starer'.

My God, hares are large: this tawny, magnificent

creature must be two feet long; almost half the size again of its drab rabbit cousin.

For a minute, maybe, the hare and I see eye to eye; then a tractor-juggernaut thunders along to interrupt the moment; the hare bolts through a hole in the tangle of the hedge-bottom and into the field. I go to the gate to follow its progress, and there it is, loping effortlessly through turnips.

The hare is *lepus* from the Latin *levipes*, light foot, because of speed such as this. ‘First catch your hare’, began Hannah Glasse’s famous recipe for jugged hare in *The Art of Cookery Made Plain and Easy*, 1747, which is no easy feat when hares run at 40mph. (Alas, the infamous cooking instructions were misquoted. She actually wrote ‘first case your hare’; ‘catch’ was far more entertaining and stuck.) Hare is strong meat, made stronger by being cooked in its own blood; a freshly killed hare is prepared for jugging by removing its entrails and then hanging it in a larder by its hind legs, which causes the blood to accumulate in the chest cavity. I can still remember my grandparents’ cold larder in the 1970s, with hares hanging for so long that bits dropped off as one brushed past. ‘More flavour that way,’ insisted Poppop, regarding his hang-em-till-high method. Jugged hare has all but disappeared from our tables. A survey in 2012 found that hardly any British children knew the dish or, indeed, would wish to eat it.

The Romans, who may well have introduced the hare to Britain, were keen hare-eaters; Pliny the Elder

advocated a diet of hare as a means of increasing sexual attractiveness. My grandfather had five daughters, so Pliny's postulation may be true. Then again, Pliny's other proposition concerning hares was almost entirely contradictory: he declared the animals hermaphrodite – a belief which eventually got worked into Christianity. Hares are a recurrent motif in British church architecture, standing for reproduction without loss of virginity.

In the turnip field, another hare slowly rises from the ground, stretches, then lies down to become a clod on the earth again.

Hares! A mile from Flinders. A long way. Too far for them to travel to colonize? I don't know.

Walking back to the Land Rover at Flinders I become conflicted. Some walled-over recess of superstition splits open. A hare across the path is unlucky. After a small tussle, sense v credulity, I decide that our journeys did not intersect.

But I say, just in case, 'Hare before, trouble behind: Change ye, Cross, and free me.'

FOR THREE DAYS when visiting Flinders, I pendulum-walk between the shoot and the dairy farm, but only add starlings, rooks, black flocks of crows, pheasant, buzzard, blue tit and rabbit to my wildlife tally immediately around Flinders. Snoopy the Jack Russell finds nothing worth chasing.

I erect a bird table in Flinders field, about ten feet in from the top corner, and as I'm putting out seeds the absurdity of it hits me: I'm feeding birds with the cereal grains they would have obtained naturally by any sort of halfway wildlife-friendly farming regime. Modern farming leaves no 'gleanings' – leftovers – or weed seeds. For the month of January I decide that I'll spend fifteen minutes a day observing the birds on the table, and fifteen minutes noting the birds in Flinders, plus the adjoining twenty-acre winter wheatfield owned by the Ramsdale twins, or the Chemical Brothers as I have already mentally dubbed them.

The £25 bird table from B&Q is more than a litmus test for birds; I'm trying to seduce birds to a home, to a haven. Until I can get planting in the spring there is little else I can do to seduce birds to the field. To the same end I also suspend two galvanized pheasant hoppers just off the ground, so gamebirds can poke their beaks in but not rats their snouts.

*Plough Monday, next after that Twelfth tide is past,
Bids out with the plough . . .*

Thomas Tusser, *500 Points of Good Husbandry*, 1580

FOR A THOUSAND YEARS or more in England, Plough Monday, the first Monday after Twelfth Night, was considered the date to start ploughing. Actually, 'Plough Monday' is a misnomer because on that day ploughboys

tended to play ye olde version of trick or treat, and the mouldboard on the plough rarely turned earth. Ploughmen led a dancing procession through the streets, dragging a gaudily decorated plough behind them. On arriving at a house, the ploughmen asked for bread, cheese and ale, or a contribution of money. If they were turned away, they ploughed a vengeful furrow or two in front of the house. Trick! In the ‘cock-pit’ centre of arable England – Norfolk, Cambridgeshire, Huntingdonshire, Northamptonshire, Lincolnshire, Leicestershire, Nottinghamshire, Cheshire, Derbyshire and Yorkshire – ploughboys were more refined and put on a mummings’ play or ‘jag’ for the inhabitants of the abode called upon. Treat! Typically the jag ended with a pleading song, such as:

*Good master and good mistress,
As you sit around the fire,
Remember us poor plough boys,
Who plod through mud and mire.
The mud is so very deep,
The water is not clear,
We’ll thank you for a Christmas box,
And drop of your best beer.*

Invariably, the plough jags featured a crone who was ‘thrashed’ to death and brought to life again. (The thrashing motions exactly replicated the manner by which threshers used flails to beat seed out of its chaff coat.) The symbolism is obvious: away with the old corn

spirit, in with the new. There were accompanying acrobatic dances; it was hoped that the crops would grow as high as the dancers could leap. If the winter was severe, the procession was boosted by threshers carrying their flails, reapers bearing their sickles, and carters with their long whips; the smith and miller joined in too, because the one sharpened the ploughshare, the main cutting blade of the plough, and the other ground the corn. The assembled peasants wished themselves a plentiful harvest from the sown corn – as medieval peasants called wheat and rye – and that God would speed the plough as soon as they began to break the ground.

The Romans would have understood the ceremony, the woad-tattooed Britons too. The Christian God was absent from these rituals of medieval Britain. Pagan habits died hard; Plough Monday was truly a ceremony of propitiation, a relic of a rite as old as the plough itself. In Ancient Greece, Demeter, goddess of grain and agriculture, had been placated with an offering of the first fruits at a feast called the Procrisia, ‘Before the Ploughing’. The Romans in Britain gave oblation to Ceres.

Ever savvy, the Christian Church absorbed the Bronze Age fertility rite into its own ritual. By the Puritan era, Plough Monday had moved to become the altogether respectable Plough Sunday (traditionally held on the Sunday after Epiphany, the Sunday between 7 January and 13 January). In many churches a ceremonial or

church plough was kept in the church, in front of the altar of the Ploughmen's Guild, which was lit with tapers of rush or wax paid for by the local husbandmen, in order to ensure success for their ploughing and subsequent labours throughout the year. Otherwise, a plough was brought into church and blessed so that the year's labour might prosper.

I can tell you what the service entailed, because in East Herefordshire, at St Andrew's at Hampton Bishop, we still had Plough Sunday as late as 1981. Following the choir and clergy, a farmer who was also a churchwarden (in this case tweed-jacketed, brogue-wearing Mr Jenkins: a sartorial rig that said, 'Despite our vocal burr, We. Are. Fucking. Gentry') led the procession of the plough up the aisle; behind him came three farmhands (John Johnson and his big-me sons) who manhandled a vintage Ransome plough up the nave. On reaching the chancel step the farmer formally stated to the vicar his reason for bringing the plough to church, offering the work of the countryside to the service of God. The old iron plough rested on the soft-blue carpet of the chancel, while we warbled hymns. The vicar, and quite a few members of the congregation, passed the service staring at Melanie Williams's embonpoint, as though she were a latter-day fertility goddess.

The devil, though, had all the best plough songs, which were generally not work songs, more guild anthems. Plough songs were sung down the inn or during jags, rather than when one traipsed behind a

flatulent horse or behind the mobile muckspreader that is the ox.

The most famous plough songs are ‘God Speed the Plough’, ‘The Painful Plough’ and ‘John Barleycorn’; in this last the personification of barley is not a woman, as in the jags, but John Barleycorn, who is attacked and made to suffer indignities and eventually death. These correspond roughly to the stages of barley growing, cultivation, and brewing or distilling in alcoholic beverages.

The Penguin Book of English Folk Songs says this about it:

This ballad is rather a mystery. Is it an unusually coherent folklore survival of the ancient myth of the slain and the resurrected Corn-God, or is it the creation of an antiquarian revivalist, which has passed into popular currency and become ‘folklorised’? Some have also compared it to the Christian transubstantiation, since his body is eaten as bread and drunk as beer.

‘John Barleycorn’ was printed in the reign of James I but is said to be much older. There are as many as two hundred variants, but here’s one of the best:

*There was three men came out of the west,
Their fortunes for to try,
And these three men made a solemn vow,
John Barleycorn should die.*

They ploughed, they sowed, they harrowed him in,
Threwed clods upon his head,
And these three men made a solemn vow,
John Barleycorn was dead.
Then they let him lie for a very long time
Till the rain from heaven did fall,
Then little Sir John sprung up his head,
And soon amazed them all.
They let him stand till midsummer
Till he looked both pale and wan,
And little Sir John he growed a long, long beard
And so became a man.
They hired men with the scythes so sharp
To cut him off at the knee,
They rolled him and tied him by the waist,
And served him most barbarously.
They hired men with the sharp pitchforks
Who pricked him to the heart,
And the loader he served him worse than that,
For he bound him to the cart.
They wheeled him round and round the field
Till they came unto a barn,
And there they made a solemn mow of poor John Barleycorn.
They hired men with the crab-tree sticks
To cut him skin from bone,
And the miller he served him worse than that,
For he ground him between two stones.
Here's little Sir John in a nut-brown bowl,
And brandy in a glass;
And little Sir John in the nut-brown bowl
Proved the stronger man at last.

*And the huntsman he can't hunt the fox,
Nor so loudly blow his horn,
And the tinker he can't mend kettles nor pots
Without a little of Barleycorn.*

The 1782 version by the Scottish poet Robert Burns had a definite Gaelic twist, concluding:

*Then let us toast John Barleycorn,
Each man a glass in hand;
And may his great posterity
Ne'er fail in old Scotland!*

But when Burns wrote these words Plough Monday/Sunday and the plough rituals had already started their precipitous fall. The Reformation had purged the guilds' ceremonials, while the historical changeover of farming from arable to pastoral – there was more money in fleece and meat – meant the toppling of the ploughman from his position of pre-eminence on the farm. Then came twentieth-century atheism, plus the switch to autumn ploughing. When ploughing begins in September, a ceremony for Wotan/God/Whoever to speed the plough in spring is redundant.

I'M SPENDING AN inordinate amount of time reading about ploughing since I can't do it in actuality. In the lost land of ancient ritual it may have been possible to

plough in January; in the wet west of today's England the ground is too sodden to walk on, let alone traverse with a tractor and steel plough.

I have now looked up 'Flinders' in our bulky, blue-cloth-jacketed *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, because words are more real when they are in books:

Flinders (fli.nderz) sb. pl. rarely sing. 1450 (prob of Scand. Origin; cf. Norw. Flindra thin chip or splinter.) Fragments, pieces, splinters. Chiefly in phrases, as to break or fly in (to flinders).

I am beginning to think that my dream of a flour-lent wheatfield is flying into 'flinders'.

It is still raining. When will the weather change? Such is the plowman's lament. One windy night I go over to Flinders to check on the sheep and moonlight winks at me from shattered puddles.

THINGS ARE WORSE than I thought. The sheep have now chowed down the kale for me to see half the surface of Flinders.

Wind rakes the dull earth. A single magpie loiters by the sheep trough, scavenging crumbs of leftover sheep nuts. I can't quite put my finger on what is wrong until I get to the wire stock fence by the paddock, where the field slopes away from the wind. The sheep are huddled together, backs to the gale.

My head is bowed, with the involuntary focus on the ground that comes from butting into the elements.

I'm looking at the bottom of the stock fence, criticizing the man or men who strung it (a farmer's default complaint) because the staples have been skimped on and so the wire has been loosened by sheep's rubbing on summer days. There are six energetic lines of mole hills running down the paddock I'm renting, under the fence, into Flinders - but then the little red volcanic explosions stop. Once into Flinders, the moles have reversed away.

There are no mole hills in Flinders field.

A mole signals worms as reliably as a canary down a coal mine signals gas.

With a dull foreboding to match the day, I get the spade out of the back of the Land Rover, then walk into the centre of Flinders and dig a hole a foot square, a foot deep into the thick, cold clay. I do it again, again, again. The sheep watch, bemused. Worms do, admittedly, go down into the earth in winter - but not like this. In each hole, I'm finding two worms. Tops. The worms are slow and purple with cold and I rebury them hurriedly.

The main part of the field is effectively dead. I dig a hole in the two-foot-wide grass margin around the field; this has a much better worm quotient, five or so worms per hole. I just have to persuade the worms, by some gentle husbandry, to migrate into the field proper.

It starts raining. Again. Even so, I cannot resist putting my face to the rain to look at the Chemical Brothers' wheatfield next door. I'm mesmerized by it; I keep rubber-necking it in the manner of gawpers passing a car crash. Around the edge there is a white bleach mark from the overuse of pesticides and herbicides, in the crop itself are alopecia patches of bareness. There are cracks in the earth sizeable enough to insert a hand into.

Every time I behold the Chemical Brothers' field I start reaching for similes. As barren as Mars. As dead as a dodo. Desert-like.

I then do something illegal, and push through a gap in the hedge and up over the fence to an especially bare, scorched-earth corner of the Chemical Brothers' field, and dig a hole. Actually, 'dig' is the wrong word. Despite the recent rain, the ground is so compacted I have to chip into it with the spade. I give up after six inches. There are no worms. The field is rutted eighteen inches deep where the tractor has struggled to drag the plough through the wormless soil.

Here's the thing: earthworms burrow underground by muscular contractions which alternately shorten and lengthen their bodies, as they seek and then expand crevices by force. A worm is a piston, aerating the soil and providing drainage. A worm, in coming to the surface and bringing down organic matter such as leaves, then eating it, increases soil fertility. Worm faeces (casts) are five times richer in available nitrogen, seven times

richer in available phosphates, and eleven times richer in available potassium than the surrounding soil. Charles Darwin, who knew a thing or two about nature, was the first person to write a comprehensive book on the ecology of earthworms, namely *The Formation of Vegetable Mould through the Action of Worms*, 1881. As Darwin noted: 'The plough is one of the most ancient and most valuable of man's inventions; but long before he existed the land was in fact regularly ploughed by earthworms. It may be doubted whether there are many other animals which have played so important a part in the history of the world as have these lowly organised creatures.'

Forgotten Rule Number 1 of Farming: The more worms, the less the ploughing.

Darwin estimated that arable land contains up to 53,000 worms per acre. Fifty-three thousand worms per acre? Not in this field, not in this time. And not in Flinders either.

High irony: I am digging in the ancient Hundred of Wormelow, named for the River Worme.

The heavens open, and as I make my exit the Chemical Brothers' field follows me. The topsoil slips off in a pinky watery sheet, down into the shared ditch, adding more silt. Their twenty-acre field must be losing tons of soil per year. I cannot possibly do the maths, but soil erosion on some fields is such that losses of 47 tons per hectare have been recorded. In the last forty years the Earth has lost a third of its arable land due to soil

erosion. The UK has maybe one hundred harvests left if we do not take better care of our soil. Winter wheat, as planted in the Chemical Brothers' field, exacerbates the problem because the land is tilled for the crop in time for the wet and wind of the year's end. (One Norwegian study in the 1990s estimated that autumn ploughing caused as much as 90 per cent more soil erosion than spring ploughing.)

Then I catch the smell of the ditch. It's the taint of sanitization. It's the ammonia whiff of nitrogen fertilizer.

Back in Flinders, I stick my hand into one of the spade holes in the field margin, and pull out a handful of this red earth that still has worm-life. As I walk back to the Land Rover I roll a mini-Earth with my fingers. The clay stains my hand.

On a whim, I decide to take my mini-Earth home, and put it under the kids' *National Geographic* microscope.

It is a journey into earth.

There is some initial cack-handedness; I put too much soil on the slide and see red mist when I peer down the eyepiece. Then I place a pinhead's worth of soil - literally - on the slide, add water and a glass cover.

You have not seen the world until you have seen a grain of earth under x600 magnification. There are easy-to-spot long threads of plantlike material, which I take to be fungi. Then, in this interior universe, come floating along jellyfish, cylindrical grey beasts

so big I pull back my head, and wriggling transparent snakes.

There is life in the soil of Flinders.

And what soil: under the lens is a geological display case of rock shapes, glassy rectangles of silicates dominant. It is the silicates that give the red clay its shine when dug or ploughed.

Red is the colour of Herefordshire. When I lived away at university and reached Llangua on the way home, I knew I was back in Herefordshire, not because of the roadside sign with the county's name but because of the red of the ploughed fields beside it. They were sign enough.

I had, I confess, been doubting my vision of turning Flinders into a traditional wheatfield but there is something so miraculous about the hidden life of the soil that it feels negligent to doubt. How can a son of soil abandon soil?

That night I drive back out to Flinders to check the sheep. With the Milky Way above my head, the talismanic Plough configuration in the east, I walk the field in semi-blindness, because I want to *feel* the field under my feet. This earth, this clay from Old Red Sandstone, was formed 400 million years ago in this very place, when thick deposits of sand and mud accumulated in a basin and were stained red by oxidized iron minerals.

And I want to look at that other universe, the one above my head.

On air as clear as glass, I can hear the faint rumble of traffic on the A466, and the eerie, ecstatic cries of foxes mating in Three Acre Wood.

AT THE END OF January I tot up the visitors to my bird table. The square foot of board has attracted more avian species than the entire twenty-five acres of arable land surrounding it. Hardly scientific, but horribly illustrative.

The table has seen goldfinch, greater spotted woodpecker, house sparrow, wood pigeon, rook, jackdaw, chaffinch, hedge sparrow, blackbird, robin, song thrush, tree sparrow, blue tit, great tit, coal tit, redwing. (The hoppers have attracted pheasant.) There is volume as well as variety on this Piccadilly Circus of bird tables, particularly now that I have draped it with more seed feeders and suet holders.

The bird species in the Chemical Brothers' field and Flinders total, in one month, wood pigeon, pheasant, hedge sparrow, rook.

DRIVING TO FLINDERS to offload a hay rack I go past the shoot at Thorneycroft, where a dozen men suave in tweed, from knee-breeches to cap, are standing beside the road. They have expensive green wellingtons. Aigle. Barbour. Hunter. Le Chameau. The smooth-cheeked gentlemen are 'guns' up from the City. Slightly apart is

a miscellaneous group of men and women in anoraks holding sticks with flags; these are the local 'beaters'.

I've got Edith in the Land Rover cab beside me; she looks out of the window at the other black Labradors, the ones waiting beside the guns. As we go on, she turns her head 180 degrees to continue staring at the guns and the beaters and the retrievers, clearly believing it a mistake not to stop.

She then stares disdainfully at my wellingtons. Underneath the mud and battering of four years of constant wear they were Aigles once, and new.

The problem for the shoot is that birds missed by the guns get dispersed across the countryside. I'm hoping, of course, that some red-legged partridges, in their diaspora, will come down to Flinders.

Half an hour later, the shotguns start up. It is the sound of money, welcome enough in one of the poorest counties of England.

I'm at Flinders to feed the sheep with ewe nuts: they flouncy-bottom run to the trough, a remnant of lambyness; then, when I am deemed too slow with my shoulder-sack of food, cat-tangle my legs.

Some left-over medieval mist hangs in the trees of the wood, and out of the white ages come the rooks, their caws as harsh as rust.

Clever birds, rooks.

I suppose the positive in having so few bird species to look upon is that one gives the old familiars more attention.

There are eighteen rooks' nests in the wood at Flinders, black blots in the bare superstructure of ash trees. Elms used to be the rook's favourite tree to build in, but when Dutch elm disease wiped out over 99 per cent of the elm trees in the 1970s, the rooks switched to oaks, sycamores and, as at Flinders, ash.

Naturally, the rooks are visiting the bird table in search of easy pickings. To prevent them from eating absolutely everything I have hung a seed hopper and peanut hopper on hooks; these devices are patented 'bad bird'-proof.

Or maybe not. If I were not watching this with my own eyes I would not believe it. Two rooks fly in. One unhooks the seed hopper so it falls down and spills its insides; the other rook, having watched this exercise in breaking and entering, unhooks the peanut dispenser so it too plunges to cascade its contents like a gaming machine with a winning line.

I suppose I should not be surprised. In a Cambridge University experiment five hungry rooks actually manufactured a hook from a piece of wire so they could hoist a small bucket of worms out of a tube. Rooks have an intelligence to rival that of chimpanzees.

Down on the ground, the Bonnie and Clyde rooks rub beaks with each other, presumably the corvid equivalent of the human gangsta's high five.

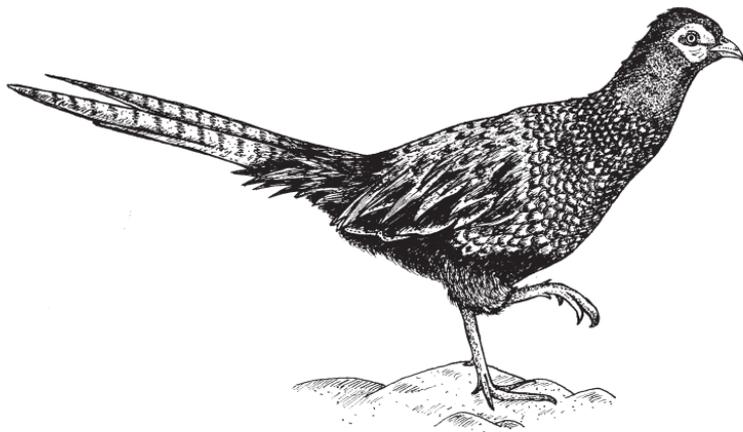
I leave the rooks their well-gotten gains, and instead drive to Countrywide in Hereford to buy a 25kg sack of bird food.

There is penitence involved here. I am feeling guilty for the rooks I have killed in the past.

CANDLEMAS, 2 FEBRUARY The day which, in the countryside, traditionally marked the end of the sexual abstinence practised since Advent; nobody down on the farm wanted heavily pregnant women in harvest time.

Great idle puddles lie across Flinders field. The sheep have almost finished the kale, and the last stalks stick out in the mist much as do the masts of sunken ships in Gothic seas. Across in the Chemical Brothers' field, the cold has caused the wheat to stall at the stage where it flops like green starfish; a cock pheasant makes the long march through the field, eyes fixed to the ground, but finds nothing.

Edith dashes into the hedge, and refuses to come to call. So I pound over and pull her out by her collar, but don't see the blackthorn switch, which catches me



under the eye. Blood drops down my face into my mouth.

In the early dusk, car lights flit on the lane. Traffic is transient; I walk bleeding across the eternal land, and then I understand. What does Herefordshire clay earth smell like? It smells like haemoglobin.

As I close the gate to the lane, a robin tipples in a little song. Does the robin know I admire him? I believe he does.

I've driven only ten yards when I see that a clump of lesser celandines has flowered on the roadside verge. Slowing down, I spot snowdrops tight under the hedge. The floral white bells are late in ringing this year. If the snowdrop is native to anywhere in Britain, it is here in the west. Usually, I look for snowdrops on my daughter's birthday, 19 January. Curious, though, they should appear on Candlemas, since it is by the name 'Candlemas Bells' that they used to be known to country people elsewhere in Britain.

Flowers on one side of the hedge, but not the other, the fieldside. The roadside verges of Britain are our greatest unacknowledged nature reserve.

14 FEBRUARY IN deceitful heat, a small clump of red-wings fly north; they are less showy than fieldfares. As the thin fawn birds leave the scene, a female kestrel slips in to perch on the telegraph wire which runs across the field. Kestrels are dimorphic, meaning male and female look dissimilar. A male kestrel has a grey

head, the larger female a brown one. There is something saucy-postcard preposterous about a moustachioed male kestrel and his big wife, but love, especially on St Valentine's Day, is blind. She makes a *kee-kee-kee* courtship call, and he comes scythe-winged out of the sun to fly above her; he stoops, and she spirals coquettishly up before him, and they play kiss-chase all the way to the wood.

This is now the third time I have seen kestrels at Flinders.

IN THE NIGHT comes Jack Frost, the elemental serial killer of farmland birds. For morning after morning, Flinders is encased in minus-three white iron. In frost the birds of open farmland have it bad. The tree creeper can still find food in bark and crevices in the wood, but what hope rooks and starlings? The frost renders the ground far too hard for them to pickaxe for worms and grubs, which comprise the mainstay of their diet; unlike the majority of the corvid clan, crows, ravens and the ubiquitous magpie, the rook does not scavenge for carrion.

I am getting rather fond of my rook neighbours, and put out extra mealworm on the bird table. Despite this, on the fourth day of Siberian frost there is a dead rook in the field. A rat patters out from the hedge to look at it, then scurries back.

I know why. Under the fence closest to the wood, a fox has slunk and is standing, breath panting white,

ears pricked forward, calculating risk. She can see me at the opposite corner of the field. She looks at me, looks at the black fallen bundle of rook. Then darts, grabs with her mouth and lopes away, each pad-fall sending up a small puff of crystals.

Frost has an antique charm, but after three days it wears thin. The world is old, and I feel it this day.

Buzzards in the valley over St Weonards' ridge mew pitifully as they circle the woods. If they come this way they will find small if beautiful pickings: there are the multicoloured corpses of two cock chaffinches on the waiting earth table. I seem to be losing birds, not gaining them.

OH, FEBRUARY. AFTER four days of frost, you do nothing but rain, and then you snow. The sheep have finished the kale, and so I move them into the grass paddock next door. Flinders itself is covered in a shroud an inch deep.

Snow is the white stuff of nature detecting: there are distinct marks of rabbit coming out of the wood across the paddock into Flinders; a fox has padded in their wake, then veered to the hoppers, where the beat marks of wings on snow tell a tale of a quick escape. From the laneside hedge into Flinders, a flurry of tiny paw marks goes up to the bird table, where shrews and mice have ventured for the overspill.

A mouse-shoal of house sparrows is on the table now, clamorous, then down on the ground, then flying

to the hedge at some imagined danger. The house sparrow, once a bird of the town, is now almost exclusively a bird of farmland. *House sparrow*: a bird which has lived alongside us since the Stone Age has declined in London by over 90 per cent.

Despite the snow, the sparrows emanate a discernible lustiness. They always do. In Ancient Greece, sparrow eggs were sold as aphrodisiacs; for Chaucer in *The Canterbury Tales*, the sparrow was a synonym for concupiscence: 'As hot, he was, and lecherous as a sparrow.'

The numbers of the house sparrow are also down in the countryside, which is their last bastion. Granaries from which one would have seen a hundred sparrows emerge thirty years ago are nowadays bird-proofed for efficiency (read money), but also health.

In observing the state of Britain's farmland one becomes an accountant of miseries.

And yet . . . Snow falls steadily, making the world anew, burying the land. I'm in the paddock beside Flinders at the decline of day, feeding the sheep, the sole real figures in a snowstorm toy. Then a soft-winged barn owl, its back as golden as a storybook grail, drifts across Flinders.

I want to sing. I wish I could.

THE LAND THAWS, and standing at Flinders it occurs to me that every spring is a replay of Britain emerging from the last ice age. Nature is all circles and cycles.

ON THE LANE to Flinders there is a heron.

I kid you not, a grey heron standing in the middle of the flooded byway, fishing. He looks at me with a sense of ancient entitlement, and flies away with distinct bad grace as I edge close.

Even in a Land Rover, the floodwater on the road is 'interesting', as in the Chinese curse, 'May you live in interesting times.' At one point, the swirling brown flood bodily lifts the one-ton Land Rover and deposits it twenty yards backwards.

When I finally get to Flinders, the lower portion of the field is one extended puddle. The wind ploughs long furrows in the trapped water.

Heavy with melt-water and rain, the ditch has its own violent drama. Snagged across the pipe which leads into the next field is a red stole dropped by a giddy gentlewoman tripping home from a ball.

Except, of course, it is not. It is the corpse of a yearling dog fox. The snows and rains of winter are hard on predator and prey alike.

Over the field steals a silent shadow, which passes within thirty feet of me. With its trademark fork tail and long, pterodactyl wings, the red kite is a bird unlike any other. The temperature drops by a degree or more. Hard pressed, the kite has abandoned its usual killing ground of the heathen hills to the west and come raiding on this arable land. Good luck with that, I think.

In my doubting mind, I think the world will always

be winter. But there is hope. In the roadside hedge dog's mercury is pushing up. Plants tell the seasons as definitely as the calendar. If it's dog's mercury it must be the cusp of spring. Surely!

THE ROOKS ARE squabbling in the wood, pulling their neighbours' nests apart, thieving material. It is this penchant for pick-nesting that has caused the bird to enter the lexicon as a robber. The phrase to rook, meaning to cheat, was everyday slang for the generations born before the Second World War. A rook is a crook. In the bad old days of Charles Dickens, a 'rookery' was as likely to be a teeming slum of London criminals as it was a colony of *Corvus frugilegus*.

The rook, the bird for whom no one had a good word. Somehow, even the rook's admirable habit of undeviating flight became 'as the crow flies'.

I'm looking at the rooks and wondering: why live communally if one disputes all the time? See, I'm doing it too, bad-mouthing rooks.

Rain pecks my cheeks as I leave Flinders.

28 FEBRUARY I walk into Flinders to pull out a hay rack; the ground is so sodden-soft it feels like skin sloughing off the body of the planet. For every two steps I go forward, I slip one back.

The sky is rumped, cotton-white, an unmade bed.

A shower of arrowheads shoots over my head and lands on the bird table to attack the mealworm: starlings, wearing winter's starry night on their feathers. One starling hops off and over the paddock fence on to the back of a sheep, in the manifestation of an ancient alliance; the starling picks off parasites (food), hence the local name of 'shepstarling'.

These are the first starlings I have seen at Flinders. The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has a list of twelve specialist farmland birds, birds whose life cycle ties them to agriculture. They are corn bunting, goldfinch, grey partridge, lapwing, linnet, skylark, starling, stock dove, tree sparrow, turtle dove, yellowhammer and whitethroat.

Actually, the list is too thin. Rooks, barn owls, pheasants, red-legged partridges, quail, corncrakes and cirl bunting are also specialist farmland birds.

Still, I feel a distinct sense of triumph in persuading a bird on Defra's list to Flinders. A pheasant, tail pressed to earth, head held aloft, *cok-coks*, then vibrates its wings in apparent celebration. A chaffinch trills merrily from the hedge, where ladders of cleavers are starting to climb, and the steely whips of ash are fecund with rabbit-nose buds.

These are more signs of spring. Winter is not invincible. The starlings are portents of something else. Hopefully, I am mending the broken heart of Flinders.

THE OLD ENGLISH name for March was *Hlyda*, meaning loud; and the wind is suitably flailing wet and wild across Flinders.

I can only trust in the truth of the ancient saw about the month: 'Comes in like a lion, and goes out like a lamb.'

By now it is early March; cock blackbirds are fighting on the lane, cock pheasants in the field. On the 5th I lie awake at home at 5.30am, the dawn chorus shimmering in my head. By the day, the dawn chorus increases in volume and variety as the birds sing their spring songs.

Still the ground is unsuitable for ploughing. I've taken all the ewes home from Flinders for lambing. All except Soo, a Juglet (black and white to non-sheepophiles) Shetland. Soo has been with us through change of farm, change of flock. When my daughter was a baby, Soo was a lamb herself. At some indefinable point Soo passed from being part of the flock to part of another family. Ours.

At fifteen years of age, Soo may well be the oldest ovine about to lamb in Britain. Soo has also managed to sprain her leg, meaning that in transport she will topple over. There is little option other than for me to spend the night at the Flinders paddock with her, sleeping in the Land Rover cab. So over I go in the Land Rover at 8pm on the 10th with a duvet to tuck around me, a dog to tuck around me, a thermos and the box of lambing kit.

I can't sleep. Jackdaws, the original dysfunctional family, are raving somewhere in the hilling land behind Flinders, because jackdaws are never quiet. Their call is *kya-kya-kya*, but squeakily high-pitched, an alarm rather than a lullaby. 'Jack' is an old term for small and for rogue, and the jackdaw is both. Every two hours I have to check Soo anyway. She is staring at the moon, a sure sign that the birth process is beginning.

It is freezing in the Land Rover cab, even under a duvet and a dog, so to get warm I take the reluctant Edith for a walk.

I like walking the lanes at night. At night you can pretend that the countryside still has birds, flowers, bees, animals. Frost clenches the ground; the flat top of the hedge is capped white.

You can still get miracles in the countryside at night. As we turn for home, I see that the moon has a giant glowing ring around it: a moon halo, caused by the moonlight refracting through ice crystals.

Yes, you can still get miracles. At about 4am Soo lambs in moonlight.

There is nothing uglier than a newborn lamb, and this one, like all the others, comes into the world in an alien pod of slime. (Or, if you were of a cruel frame of mind, you would say the membrane shroud anticipates exactly that future plastic life on the supermarket shelf.) The mother is mute throughout; sheep are prey animals, and try for silence when weak.

A tawny owl screams from the wood. It might be

March, the so-called first month of spring, but retreating winter has turned and stuck its talons into Herefordshire. I am shivering, despite the multiple gilets and coats which make me look like the Michelin man's fat brother.

Is the lamb alive? In this night scene in a paddock in darkest Herefordshire, the yellow encasing the lamb is the only colour.

Is the lamb alive? . . . Ah, yes, there is a tremble in the chest.

Will Soo do her usual magnificent maternal routine? Yes, she is licking the lamb, licking it. First the membrane off the face, then stimulating the lamb's body with her tongue.

The lamb is a black-and-white patchwork, because this is one of those magic nights when the designs of nature are perfectly coordinated. The lamb does a perceptible shake of the head. Then a snuffle. In dialect, the lamb is 'sharp' - vital. Within minutes it is up on its preposterous stilts.

Will the tottery lamb find the teats? The lamb head-butts all the wrong places . . . Ah, yes, the lamb has latched on. The tiny tail wiggles happily.

The lamb is beautiful. Because nothing is prettier, gentler-eyed than a new lamb. When the lamb has suckled, I pick it up and spray the navel in gentian violet to prevent joint ill. In my hands, I can feel the silken curls of its fleece. A girl. She will be kept and she will be called Moonlight.

My eyes are teary, but only, of course, because of the cold.

Soo – protective, annoyed – stamps her feet. I return the lamb to her and she leads it away across the paddock to join some shearlings I have left as company. They become shadows on the frost. Black. White.

All I need now is a south wind to kill the frost, then I can go a-ploughing.

The south wind does come. Two days later, garlic mustard starts to spire, long and tall, on the lane side of the hedge. Salad and green, its leaves really feel and look like spring.