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The Plough and the Gulls

The black-headed gulls follow in our wake as if we are a little fishing boat out at sea. The sky is full of winged silhouettes and screaming beaks, and streaks of white seagull shit splatter like milk down on to the soil. I am riding in the tractor, crammed in behind my grandfather. My backside aches from sitting on adjustable spanners, a wrench, a socket set. We are ploughing a twelve-acre field, high on a limestone plateau that tilts slightly down to the Eden Valley in the distance. The land is divided into long rectangular fields by silver drystone walls. It feels like we are on the top of the earth, with only the clouds above us. The birds rise and fall in hungry tumbling waves. The highest soar far above the field like children's kites, anchored by lengths of invisible string. Some hang in mid-air a few feet behind the tractor, wings beating, just above the plough; others glide, motionless, almost near enough for me to touch, with searching eyes and wrinkled yellow legs. One gull floats, with a leg hanging, bent and crippled. The bluegrey Lakeland fells in the distance rise like the silhouetted backbones of giant sleeping dragons.

The six ploughshares slice the earth into ribbons, and the shining steel mouldboards lift and turn and roll them upside down. The dark loamy inside of the earth is exposed to the sky, the grass turned down to the underworld. The upside shines moist from the cut. The furrows layer across the field like sets of cresting waves sweeping across some giant brown ocean. The freshest lengths are darker, the older ones fading, lighter coloured, drying and crumbling, across the field. More seagulls arrive, hearing a rumour blown on the winds to the four corners of the sky. They come across the fields and the woods on eager wings, on flight lines so straight they could have been drawn on a map with a ruler. They scream and cry out to one another, excitedly, spotting the freshly turned soil.

The tractor engine works hard, oil-black smoke spewing from the exhaust, as we head up the hill. My nose fills with the smell of diesel and earth. My grandfather turns backwards and forwards, half-focused on the straightness of the furrows, using two landmarks ahead, far beyond the headlands, to guide his line and keep it honest. One mark is an old Scots pine, the other a gap in a wall on a distant hill. He tells me about a young ploughman he knew who used a white speck as his more distant

sightline mark, but ended up with crooked work, because the furthest mark turned out to be a white cow that was walking to and fro across a distant hillside. The other half of my grandfather's focus is on looking back to ensure the plough does its work behind him. So he sits half-twisted between the two angles, the muscles in his neck taut, his leathery cheeks rough with silver stubble.

The gulls fall upon the virgin soil and grab worms from atop the loosened surface. And then they quickly take to the sky again, racing away, in a mad wing-flapping dash, gulping down their catch as fast as they can before they are mobbed. When they have the feast stuffed safe in their bellies, they are a hundred yards or more behind the plough. They flap back into the air and gain height, and glide down the field until they are above the tractor again, and then they repeat the whole cycle, over and over. Further down, the rooks march across the field and some of them take to their black wings and join the swirling crowd.

There is a groan as metal scratches across the limestone bedrock. The tractor suddenly strains, engine toiling, like someone has dropped an anchor, then metal creaking, and stone breaking, and the plough lifts a little and surges forwards, released. A slab of rock appears behind the plough, sprung to the top. The biggest stones remain largely submerged, like icebergs, just the scratched tip, or a broken-off fragment, showing above the furrows. The soil on this hard farm is shallow, so this happens again and again.

The night creeps in. The shadows lengthen. The seagulls head off for their roosts in giant Vs. They look to me like the bomber formations in war films. The fells tremble and flicker in the darkening blue light. The headlands are ploughed, the work is done. And we head home. The tractor headlights shine a halogen-yellow tunnel through the branches that arch over the road. Rabbits scurry across in front of the tractor into the verges. I sit, yawning. Fat white stars flicker in the blueblack sky. As the tractor travels back through the little village, the houses are glowing with electric light, TVs and people walking about in their kitchens or slumped in their living rooms.

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Every journey must start somewhere, and this is where mine began. I sat in the back of that tractor, with the old man in front of me, and for the first time in my life thought about who we were and what the field was, and the relationship between the gulls and the plough. I was a boy living through the last days of an ancient farming world. I didn't know what was coming, or why, and some of it would take years to reach our fields, but I sensed that day might be worth remembering.

This book tells a story of that old world and what it became. It is the story of a global revolution as it played out in the fields of my family's two small farms: my father's rented farm in the Eden valley, which we left nearly two decades ago now, and my grandfather's little Lake District fell farm, seventeen miles to the west, where I live and work today. It is the story, warts and all, of what farming was like here in my childhood, and what it became. It is about farmers like us, in our tens of thousands, across the country and around the world, and why we did the things we did – and what some of us are now trying to do to make it right. The last forty years on the land were revolutionary and disrupted all that had gone before for thousands of years – a radical and ill thought-through experiment that was conducted in our fields.

I lived through those years. I was a witness.

James Rebanks, *English Pastoral*, Allen Lane (2020)

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