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# FIELD WORK

## What Land Does to People and What People Do to Land

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# *Contents*

have better welfare standards. But whichever direction they were coming from, all of them were talking about farming, not farmers.

I was curious to know what made this profession so different. The longer I spent at Rise the more I looked for something that told me about the individuals, not the systems. I wanted to know about the psychology of this life and the grain of that bond between man and land. The best I could do would be to stand and translate – to see that same view down the hill the way Bert saw it, but also the way someone from a city might. Perhaps inevitably, the result is skewed towards the west and Wales – Powys, Shropshire, Warwickshire, Herefordshire, Carmarthen. In part, that's because it's the area closest to where I live. But it's also an agricultural area with a wide variety of different farm types, from huge soft-fruit businesses to tiny upland sheep farms. This is my attempt to understand a little bit of what people do to land, and what land does to people.



# 1

# Fallen Stock

It starts with an end.

One bright morning in the middle of May, Ian Carswell comes sliding to a halt in a Tenbury car park. I'm perched by the floral arrangement and he's in a tipper lorry. It's a smallish thing with raw grey sides and nothing distinctive about it, the sort of truck which carries topsoil or aggregate all over the country. The only thing which might give a clue to its true purpose is the small blue 'Andersons' lettering on both doors.

'Jump in,' says Ian, leaning over and prodding open the passenger door.

The cab smells of self-consciousness and lemon air-freshener. Ian wouldn't normally allow a passenger, and almost certainly wouldn't be taking one now if the boss hadn't told him to. This is his space and his long-standing office, the place where he has spent the best part of his life, more personal to him than home. Over the years he has customised everything here to suit his purposes, and everything now shows the marks of unflinching use. The dials on the air-con have faded and a couple of the steering-wheel levers are supported with a light tracery of duct tape while the space between the seats contains a customised filing system, including a box of fresh job sheets and forms, several pens and a slot for completed paperwork.

On the dashboard are a phone and transmitter, and above the windscreen there's a tracker and satnav. Once in a while the tracker beeps, but Ian never even switches on the GPS. Over the course of a working day, he may travel between 100 and 300 miles, but he's been driving this area for so long he knows every road, lane, track and shortcut within a hundred-mile radius of Shropshire better than most London cab drivers know King's Cross to Blackfriars. Behind the driver's seat are the tools of Ian's trade: a captive bolt gun, a set of blanks and a blue plastic pithing rod.

He has, he says, already worked out most of today's route. Barring any unexpected changes of plan we're starting in Tenbury, going east towards Bridgnorth, covering the fringes of Kidderminster, then round into Wales and back down again via Ludlow. Several call-outs came in yesterday, the office has already been on to him about several more, and he's expecting a run of new instructions this morning as clients catch up after the bank holiday. He'll have to patch each one into his route as they come in, endlessly recalibrating his own internal map to take account of the size, urgency and distance of each job. Andersons has eight drivers collectively covering the West Midlands from a base just over the Welsh border. Every day, each one loops out from the centre in a ragged oval, stopping, picking up, moving on. If their working journeys were traced on a map, the resulting image would look something like the petals of a flower, each route blooming out from Bewdley or Newtown or Cleehill until collectively they capillarise much of Wales and Western England.

Beyond the windows the country rushes past in an endless pattern-repeat: field, wood, dealership, fencing, farm, pub, garage, rail bridge, road sign, big house, small house. The cab is high enough to peer over the hedges at the swell of greening grass: two agricultural feed suppliers, a stately home exposed in its





empty parkland, hay bales in fodder bins ringed in brown hoofprints like crop circles, wires, pylons. A month ago this landscape was down to the bone: dun-brown with fatigue, the silvery clavicles of old roots poking through the topsoil, snowdrops flattened under fresh tyre tracks. Now everything is softened and made hopeful by spring, the threat of winter receding into the earth again. On a morning like this everything in these fields looks eternal, a day that has nothing to do with death.

Ian, meanwhile, is concentrating on his schedule, sitting with the steering wheel held in front of him like a man before a Sunday roast. He's big, but the bulk is mainly muscle, and he's both fit and agile. Round-faced, strong-shouldered, a balding man with a dark moustache. He wears a small pair of thin-rimmed glasses, a blue work shirt with 'MT Andersons' across the top-left pocket, a pair of black wellies, a digital watch (consulted frequently) and the remote control for the tipper winch slung round his neck.

Ian is a driver with forty-five years' experience working for a large fallen-stock operator nearby. Or rather, Ian is a knackerman, knackering being the old name for a role which over the past fifty years has been entirely modernised. His job and the way he conducts it are unrecognisable from the profession he originally came into. Now, there's forms, procedures, trucks, lifters, legislation. Testing for BSE is mandatory on any animal over forty-eight months, and any new drivers coming to the role have to be fully licensed and certified. A business which was once a byword for the wrecked and smelly ends of animal life is now as antiseptic as modern biosecurity regulations can make it.

But in the essentials, knackering is as it always was. Ian and his colleagues deal with the animals which for one reason or another do not thrive: the sick or lame or old, the ones which never got close to being old, the cows condemned, the pigs with

broken legs, the orphan lambs which took one look at life and quit, the horses on their last legs, the sickly ewes and surplus bull calves. These are the animals who will never leave home or face the long final journey to the nearest abattoir. In their case, the executioner comes to them.

Like farming itself, knackering is governed by the seasons. Despite all of agriculture's efforts to even out seasonal peaks and troughs there are still more deaths in winter and spring. Even with stock indoors, cold and infection still kill off the weak or the soft. Spring brings the diseases of growth: too much too quickly, or not enough for too long. Summer could mean either drought or rain, and then it's back into autumn – early frosts, gales and hail. And then, year-round, there are the plagues of economics: animals which may well be healthy but which could only be raised at a loss.

In this case it's the Tuesday after a bank holiday weekend, three days strafed with thunderstorms, sudden downpours and shifts in temperature so sharp the roads smoke. Animals don't like these leaps and plunges any more than humans do. Young lambs may not be able to tolerate the lurch from warm day to evening chill, and these murky, fevered days of summer breed fly-strikes – flies laying their eggs in the sheep's fleece, producing maggots which then feed off wounds which can prove fatal if left unchecked. And that's without the year-round hazards of cast sheep (pregnant ewes who have rolled over and can't get up again), cows with mastitis, sheep with scrapie or scab or liver fluke. The deaths go on all the time, quietly, unobserved, in the corners of fields and byres, warmed or unwarmed by the sun. Thunderstorms are a different matter. Lightning goes to ground down the closest tall object. If that happens to be a tree, the roots and ground will take up the charge and lead it through to whatever – or whoever – is sheltering beneath, meaning that several animals can be killed or hurt at once.





Half the skill of his job, Ian points out, is the tracking. If the forecast says there's going to be storms then he can most likely predict an increase in call-outs, but if, after two weeks of bad weather, it's going to be sunny and windless then farmers might finally have a chance to find the hill ewe who slipped down a gully, or the horse who chose a fine spring morning to jump too far. Likewise, it's the daily mental route-mapping and the joining-up of one job (dead cow, tricky access) with another (live boar, no further information) into a seamless and economical day's driving. There's also the matter of how best to load. The tipper takes up to a certain weight, and once that weight is reached Ian has to return to HQ, unload, disinfect and then head out again. Driving all the way back to the depot in the middle of the day takes time – time that would be better spent on the road – so if at all possible he wants to load in such a way that he's doing the lighter animals (sheep) at the beginning and the heavier ones (cows) at the end.

Even so, he's got fifteen jobs listed even before the Andersons office opens. Some of those have been phoned in over the weekend and then emailed through to him the previous night, while others have come direct to his phone from individual farmers who know he does this run. Some jobs will arrive during the morning, and he's anticipating a busy day – usually the first day after a bank holiday is 'mayhem', whatever the weather. An average day for Andersons would be between 150 and 200 call-outs. Last bank holiday, it had 400.

And of course it's been an odd year. A malignant winter, receding and then advancing, flickering and deliberate, treacherous as a virus. Once lambing did get under way, some farms experienced losses of 30 or 40 per cent, and for the past few months Andersons has been run off its feet. The slow winter held the spring back until the light blazed in, and a great spring tide of daffodils and roses, snowdrops and celandines, narcissi

and anemones came ripping over the countryside, foaming over themselves, reaching into everything all together and all at once. This is the quickening, the first bright fuse of life, though that sudden spring-lit growth can bring its own hazards. The best grass is steady-growing stuff, not this overnight traffic-light switch from brown to green rising so fast from the ground it leaves the nutrients behind.

As we drive, Ian talks. The trouble with bank holidays, he says, is that there's always a backlog. Some farmers will phone in stock when they discover it, but others will wait until the Tuesday. Sometimes they don't even discover a dead animal until several days later. Sometimes animals expire in plain view, but often a beast which knows it's going to die will do so in private – limp into the undergrowth, find a corner by the hawthorn, vanish into the scrub. Sometimes a quick headcount reveals the absence, sometimes it doesn't. Some farmers prefer to stack up a few dead before calling the knackerman, even though they know Andersons prefers fresh stock, and would rather go out six times to pick up six recently dead ewes from a farm than once to collect six rotting carcasses. It makes no difference to the cost, after all – prices are per animal, not per mile.

The first pick-up is a couple of ewes. We pull into the yard and though I can't spot anything Ian sees them immediately, sagging from a disused wooden trailer and covered with a feed sack. No farmer around, no one in the yard. He lowers the back of the tipper, pulls the winch from its hook, loops it round one of the ewes' forelegs and presses the button on the remote. The ewe bumps up the ramp and vanishes into the back, the action so mechanical it's difficult now to imagine her as something that once moved differently. Ian walks up behind her, unloops the winch, shuts the back, signs the form and leaves it tucked into the handlebars of a derelict quad. And then we're out of there, fast enough that the smell of rotting sheep doesn't hit us





until we stop to let another car pass. 'We're in and out like the SAS. Most farmers don't even know we've been.'

Only in winter does he ever phone beforehand to give notice of his arrival. If it's been a long day and he turns up unannounced in the falling rain at 9 p.m. to a farm in total darkness, 'then the first I'm likely to know about it is a 12-bore against the side of my head. Most farmers don't take kindly to men with trucks wandering around their buildings at dead of night.'

But they phoned the job in, surely?

'And that was two days ago, and they've been that busy they've completely forgotten.'

As we pull away, a call comes in. It's a farmer called Lloyd Ian knows.

'I've got a ram here been fighting, and he's not won,' says Lloyd.

'Right,' says Ian, tapping the job in. 'There in half an hour.'

There follow a couple more farms in quick succession – three more sheep, one with its neck gnawed out by a fox or a dog. Another has been lying for several days and has blown up like a rubber glove. The stink of death drifts over the yard. No one in sight, and the weekend's rain lying dark in the tracks. Instead of attaching the winch to the ewe's legs as usual, Ian puts it round the neck. As the sheep bumps up the ramp the fleece slides off in clumps. The colour of the skin beneath is cold, sick, viscous with decay.

The truck comes swaggering down the ruts to another small Worcestershire farm, a scramble of old brick buildings. Even from a distance, there's an impression of love and cheap repairs, and a garden out the front roped with yellow roses. This time, both farmers are there – a mother and daughter, blonde and vigorous.

'Morning!' says the mother as Ian pulls himself down. The two of them come up close, their collies grinning. They know

Ian well – every farmer gets to know the slaughterman (and it is generally a job for the men) a little too well for comfort. Where there's livestock, there's dead stock, so the saying goes (Bert: 'I bloody hate that phrase'), and though any farmer with animals accepts a percentage of losses every year, that doesn't mean they don't feel a scratching unease at each one.

'It's one of my tiddlers today,' says the mother, tipping her head at the two twiggy lambs, all fluff and knuckles, that Ian is lifting into the back. 'Little one's been looking poorly for a couple of days. I told him to get on and die, but he didn't make up his mind until this morning.'

They offer tea and would clearly be happy to chat, but Ian does the forms, passes them over and jumps back into the cab. 'Sorry,' he calls through the window, restarting the engine, 'Busy morning.'

Some drivers, he explains as he turns his way back up the track, will stop. Farmers may not see anyone else but family or leave the farm for days on end, so the arrival of a familiar face is at least a chance to exchange a few practicalities, complain about the weather, share fragments of a day. Ian rarely lingers. 'I don't like stopping,' he says. 'I like going, and I like getting the job done.'

Back on the road the sun is out and the Worcestershire countryside is velvet green. A wave of cow parsley froths in our wake, and an uproar of birdsong greets us every time we step out of the cab. The next farm we go to is tucked round the back of an industrial unit. There are a lot of places like this – farms where the diversification plan has overwhelmed the original business. In some, we're still driving into a yard settled down into its own land, but others are lost or disguised. What looks like Tiny Toes Nursery or Beechcroft Leisure & Beauty now has a farm stuck shyly behind it. Past the false trail of new buildings ('Hillview Executive 3-, 4- and 5-Bed Fine & Country





Homes, Sunrise Solar & Biomass, Clee Architectural Salvage') is a track sagged with use and a set of buildings designed not to make an impression.

When we arrive at Ian's call-out, there's no sign of either the farmer or the dead animal. As Ian parks, a small, weary man in overalls with a face lined like foolscap appears round the back of a shed. He is pushing a dead tup in a wheelbarrow. The tup is upside down, legs dangling and head askew. His horns are crowned with a ragged circle of cleavers and his balls and stomach have turned blue.

'Fighting,' says Lloyd, bringing the barrow to rest.

'I can see,' says Ian.

'Went round them all last night and he was fine. Nothing wrong with him, and then when I come round this morning, dead. No warning, nothing. Picked a scrap and got his neck broke.'

'He's not that old,' says Ian.

'Two year,' says Lloyd. 'Paid £500 for him eight months ago.'

Ian takes the handles of the barrow. As it passes, Lloyd watches it.

How have things been? I ask.

'Difficult,' says Lloyd.

Ian comes back out of the tipper and puts the empty barrow down. 'Been a hard year for everyone.'

A silence.

'Busy morning?' says Lloyd.

'Fifteen, twenty.'

'We was just picking ourselves up again when the snow came. Hit us right in the middle of lambing.'

Ian hands him the forms. Lloyd looks sightlessly for a moment at the ticked boxes ('Ram, under 48 months'), and puts his signature beneath it.

Ian swings himself back into the cab.

For the first time Lloyd looks up. 'You see us looking

cheerful for Andersons,' he says to me. 'But I tell you, half the time we're smiling through the tears.'

'Not your fault,' says Ian.

'Maybe,' says Lloyd, 'but the point is to get the bloody things to market and get them sold. After that they can die all they like.'

By the time we're halfway down the track, Lloyd has disappeared.

'Poor man,' says Ian as we pass the enterprise park, and then changes the subject. His view of sheep ('Keel over if you so much as look at them the wrong way') is not a minority one. Among those who manage the lowland breeds the general view is that a sheep's main aim once in the world is to get out of it as fast as possible. They cast themselves or they fight or they get scab or bluetongue or they overheat or they eat the wrong grass or they find the one rusty nail in a clean field or they get stressed by horses or dogs or a change in the weather, or they eat yew or they get infected cuts after shearing or they abort their own lambs or they've got too much of one mineral but not enough of another. Bert: 'If a sheep could, it'd die twice.'

Once back out on the road Ian drives fast, competently, taking the narrow single-track lanes around Worcestershire with styleless efficiency. That was what got him into this job – not the knackering, but the driving. His father died when Ian was three months old and his mother wasn't able to look after him, so it was his grandparents who brought him up. His granddad was a knackerman, so Ian started doing the rounds with him from a young age. He left school at fifteen, knowing that what he really wanted to do was be a rally driver – 'that's my first love' – but also that there was no money in it. Or rather, that there was plenty of money in it, but it was all going in the wrong direction.





On the other hand, he was already trained as a slaughterman and had also realised that knackering would at least allow him to spend a lot of time on the road. Did he need qualifications? No, not when he learned. His granddad taught him everything he knew, and 'then the Ministry came and checked on me once I'd shown I'd killed everything in sight – pigs, goats, cattle, sheep, horses. And that was it. Qualified.'

As with the rest of farming, knackering doesn't go in for euphemism. Andersons' animals don't get euthanised or put down or put to sleep, they don't go to heaven or depart this world or pass away or pop their clogs or kick the bucket. They aren't even culled. They die, and sometimes Ian kills them.

'We're just dustmen,' he says. 'Dustmen for dead animals.'

Dustmen they may be, but they're dustmen with autonomy. Andersons lets its experienced drivers set their own routes and work out their own hours. He is sixty now and has been doing this job his whole working life. He has a partner but no children, a dog, a car he sometimes still rallies, a house that's been paid for, and enough put away that he has no need to keep working. He does it, he says, 'Because I love it. I enjoy my job and I get paid to do it. If they let me, I'd work Christmas.'

What does he love about it? 'The driving.'

Apart from the driving?

'The driving.' He inclines his head. 'And the planning. Working it all out. What route, how the jobs all join up, being out here. Being my own boss.'

And the killing? 'I do it because I have to do it. It's part of the job. I don't particularly like it but it's there.'

There are, he explains, two ways of doing it. He is a licensed slaughterman, which means he uses a captive bolt gun pressed directly against the crown of the animal's head, which fires a bolt straight into the brain, killing it instantly. But when dealing with an animal out in the wild or terrified of humans

or crazy with pain, Andersons has a group of trained riflemen who shoot from a distance. If they can, they clear the area beforehand, since nothing makes an animal seem more alive than the moment of its death. Deer scatter. Cows buck. Pigs have hard skulls. And horses, it is generally conceded, are worst of all. Nobody likes doing horses, because the owners get upset and want to stay and hold the collar, and the slaughterman gets nervous, and sod's law dictates that after thirty jobs that all went without a hitch it will be at that exact moment that the horse puts its head up or pulls away or just looks at them with one infinite brown eye before ripping through its halter and running for the hills.

The riflemen need a gun licence and specialist training, and though some of the Andersons staff are both slaughtermen and riflemen Ian doesn't use a rifle and doesn't want to. During the foot-and-mouth crisis in 2001 he remained as a driver, not a slaughterman, still picking up the regular jobs. Even in the midst of the worst epidemic for a generation, Andersons still had to deal with the ordinary work of agricultural life and death. All that changed for him was that every job was a single one (pick-up and return to depot) to avoid cross-contamination. At points he was lifting whole herds from farms – places where the DEFRA vets (or MAFF, as it then was) had been in and shot them all. By the end they were shooting so many that MAFF itself supposedly got a bit trigger-happy with the qualifications. 'It was, "Can you stand up? Can you hold a gun?" They were meant to check people were licensed, but they couldn't shoot fast enough.'

The disease brought some strange characters rattling out of the woodwork. Even now Andersons occasionally gets people applying for the job who are a bit odd around firearms, just a little too interested in shooting. They're easy enough to spot, and they get weeded out quickly.





So what qualities do you need for this job?

'God!' says Ian. 'Never thought about it. You know the wrong 'uns when you see them, but it's hard to put your finger on.' He slows for a UPS van. 'There's lots that don't take to it.' The UPS van speeds up again. 'Patience. Patience, definitely.'

Patience in dealing with farmers: a rare breed, singular as pangolins. Patience in knowing the habits of each one, and how they're likely to behave when their animals die. There are those who show nothing on the outside but then take their anger out on the knackerman, those who neglect their own stock, those who take each small loss as a break to their own hearts.

And experience. Experience in reading an animal's physiognomy and anticipating how it will behave – ears forward, eyes hot with fear, or the ones which look docile but then rear or strike the bolt gun from his hand. Animals – cows in particular – will read people, and even when Ian parks the tipper where they can't see it they will sense the morbidity on him.

'You get that dead smell, and they don't like it. Doesn't matter what you do, how much you disinfect, they can always smell it on you.'

He's been caught out a couple of times. Once, a few years ago, he had a cow with a broken leg. He and the farmer were concentrating so hard on getting the cow penned into a corner of the field that neither of them realised the rest of the herd were close behind them. The farmer was crushed against the fencing and had his arm broken, and Ian felt lucky to have escaped with just bruises.

And animal behaviour is changing. Or rather, animals are the same but the farming practices around them have altered, which means the way animals respond to them has also changed. A smaller workforce and a bigger herd (or flock), indoor parlours, calves separated from their mothers and brought up with artificial weaners, sows raised in farrowing pens … Where once

a farmer might have known every Daisy and Buttercup in his herd, they're now lucky to remember a few bright characters in an entirely black-and-white cast: Tag number 43267 is slow into the milkers, 59789 spooks easily, 41390 has a slight drag to the left fore.

At least dairy cows are usually in close proximity to humans twice a day – the milkers need to be attached or new cows shown where to go – but beef cattle may not be used to handling, and what contact they do have may either be painful (injections, bovine tuberculosis reactor tests) or frightening (into pens, up and down lorry ramps). It's like pets with vets: no animal in its right mind would cheerfully submit to the bewilderment of human processes, to having its teeth groped or its neck needled or a hand rammed up its bottom. Small wonder, therefore, that the final human interaction is no longer met with docility, but crazed, rodeoing panic.

'You always look for your exits, you always make sure you're near the door,' says Ian. He always insists on a crush (a metal stall) and at least one other person to help him – 'If the farmer says "She's in there", but he won't go in himself, or if you walk in and the farmer shuts the door behind you, you've got a problem. Because if he won't go in there with the animal, then ...' He grimaces. 'Amazing the number who try and pull that one on you.'

Does he consider himself an animal lover?

'Oh, yes,' he says. 'I kill animals all day every day, but I still cry like a baby when I take my dog to the vet. My old dog had diabetes and she was old and it weren't going to get better, and I knew what the sensible thing to do was. But could I? It took me weeks to make that appointment. I cried from the moment I went in the door to the moment I left.'

Certain jobs, he hates. Racehorses in particular – if a horse isn't winning, the owner or trainer will often insist it is killed





rather than sold on. Animals which have somehow escaped onto motorways, railway lines, down embankments, into ponds or canals or rivers. Some are the victims of barn or stable fires. Some rip themselves to shreds on barbed wire fences, are burned or electrocuted or impale themselves on railings. None of them are easy, and in the case of animals which are insured, the owner will often insist that Ian waits around for the vet to arrive, because it needs that official signature before a claim can be made. He does not like standing around beside an animal in distress waiting for a piece of paper.

Which leads him on to another subject – the strangest jobs he's ever had. Over the years Andersons has done everything from minke whales to zebras. ('We get tigers and lions,' says Ian's boss Will Anderson later. 'We had a hippo. Bless them, they just go in a skip.') They also occasionally pick up from a nearby safari park. 'Everything,' says Ian. 'Everything you can think of. There was a giraffe once.' It had died of natural causes, but 'God, that was tricky. First we couldn't get it out of the giraffe house and then we couldn't get it in the back of the tipper. It took us ages to work it out. Took a lot of folding, I can tell you.'

It's early afternoon now. The transmitter crackles and then goes silent again.

Five minutes later, we pull into another farmyard. The animal to be slaughtered is a newborn calf, a Friesian. He was born yesterday evening and is standing now, still lovely and precarious, in an improvised pen near the edge of the shed. He is speckled with glossy black splodges and his ears are pricked and trusting. There's absolutely nothing wrong with him. But this farm is under a bTB restriction, which means that until the herd is retested, found to be clear and the restriction lifted, none of these bull calves can be sold on the open market. A dairy herd needs only cows, and many farms can't afford to rear animals for free.

Together Ian and Rob, the farmer, lead the calf out into the shed. Ian has on a pair of thick rubber gloves and his bolt gun. He holds the calf by the chin, butts its head up against the side of his leg for support, presses the gun to the crown of the calf's head and pulls the trigger. The calf, pulling back a little from Ian's grip, falls instantly, hind legs jolting. Ian pushes the blue plastic pithing rod through the hole in the calf's skull and down the back, severing the nerves and the spinal cord. For a few moments longer the calf's muscles continue to spasm. Then he lies still, a thin line of blood trickling out of that perfect hole.

Unnoticed by us, the other cows have come up and are standing in a line, watching. The calf is out in the open and they are near the sheds, separated from him by a thin strand of electric wire. The cows' heads are down and their ears are flicking back and forward, slightly stepped back. Beneath their soft lashes their gaze moves from us to the calf and to us again. One cow turns her head away and nudges the neck of another. The calf lies there on the strawless yard in front of them, black and white. And red.

Rob stands by the tipper. In theory he could probably have done this job himself. Like most farmers, he has a licence and a shotgun and the legal right to shoot any animal in distress. But the vast majority of farmers don't. Not only because after the BSE outbreak they can no longer bury or incinerate dead animals on the farm, but because farmers do not want to destroy their own animals. They might be rearing them for meat and they absolutely understand that their ultimate destination is an abattoir, but that doesn't mean they like killing. No farmer really wants to see the knackerman, and no one wants to pay the £95 it costs to dispose of a cow or the £17 for a sheep. It's the same as Ian's old dog: they could do it themselves, but they can't.

Rob, like Lloyd, must be in his late fifties; small, stocky,





tight. He stands beside me, squinting, his back to the calf. If I wasn't here he would have found some minor job – moving a gate, a bit more straw – which would allow him to turn away from Ian and the moment of destruction. While the bTB restriction remains in force on the farm Rob's cattle can only be sold to other farms in a similar situation, thus giving him even less opportunity to justify keeping bull calves. Got to be done, he says, like he must have said a thousand times before, just can't make it work financially, reasonable rule and all, another twenty-four days to run before the sixty-day gap is up and they're all hoping to go free ... But it's clear from the angle of his body and the set of his face that even though all of this is true and the sort of thing you say to yourself every time it happens, it doesn't make it better.

The calf slides up the ramp behind him.

'A farmer's job is to look after animals,' Rob says finally. 'To feed them, take care of them, make sure they're all right. It's not his job to kill the healthy ones.' He stands for a second. Then he moves away.

'I don't have a problem killing an animal in distress,' Ian says, driving away. 'I really don't. The quicker it's done, the better. I don't want to see things in pain – I want to get it over with as quick as possible. The times I have a problem, it's killing healthy animals.' He is still taken up with bTB. 'There's a lot of it round here,' he says. 'Big chunk of my work.'

Coming to a T-junction, he slows, pointing out a line of bloated mattresses and rubble bags in the spring grass.

'Fly-tippers. That's the bank holiday – that stuff weren't there Friday.'

Because councils are now charging for the removal and disposal of rubbish, people are circumventing the payments by dumping rubbish illegally, often on farmland. It then falls to the farmer to deal with the resulting mess. Recently, an increasing

number of old or sick horses are also being stranded or let loose in strange fields at quiet times of night. Fly-grazing is the same as fly-tipping: owners may no longer want the horse, but can't afford – or don't want – to pay the charges for having them legally slaughtered, so they let them out to starve or take their chances.

Ian resumes. 'One TB job, I had to shoot a hundred and forty infected pedigree cattle in an afternoon. There was so many I couldn't do it all myself – we had to bring in a couple of extra guys to help.' Any farm which has over a certain number of reactors has its whole herd condemned. 'That, I hated, I really hated. I did the job, same as always, but I got to tell you, I took extra care – if you've got to do something like that you want it done quick, no issues. That farmer had spent his whole lifetime building up this pedigree herd, getting the bloodstock just right. He had a couple of reactors and next thing someone from the Ministry tells him he has to get rid of the lot. They all went in a day. One single day: the whole lot, every cow. How that man wasn't hanging from a tree the next day, I do not know, I really don't. He was distraught. Just distraught.'

The next job is a larger farm up on the side of a ridge. This time, it's a cow with a broken leg. The access is difficult, so Ian reverses the tipper into the yard, the back end beeping as he does so. In the farmhouse garden there are children's toys, coffee mugs on the table, an abandoned towel. A Volvo XC60 with one door still open stands at the end of the track, and inside the house there's the churn of a food mixer. Ian goes to the garden gate and calls hello a couple of times. Nothing. The mixer stops. Silence. He rings the bell. The silence gets louder.

'Leave them,' Ian says. 'Can you get the gate?'

Through the yard past the silage and the rutted field, the cow is in a field on her own. She is lying awkwardly over on one side, her udder bagging over uncomfortably. She's a brown





Friesian, soft-eyed, the broken bone raised beneath her skin like a wrong answer. It's clear from the flattened marks on the grass that she has been here for a while, dragging herself down the field. Some farmers will leave animals who seem ill or are injured for a couple of days before they call Andersons. They hope they will recover. Or that, by dying, the animal will have made the decision for them.

As Ian approaches the cow sits up, ears forward. I have no proof of this, but I know she knows what's coming. Again, Ian walks up to her, no hesitation, and takes hold of one of her horns. She lowers her head a little, a slight, generous offering. He puts the captive bolt to her crown and then he shoots. In one short motion she rolls over onto her side, broken leg banging against the empty air.

The bolt has made almost no sound but, as if on some kind of silent timer, the farmer appears. He is tall, mid-sixties, and his daughter is with him. The daughter goes off in search of the telehandler and I look at the cow, the subtle shifts in tone and hue, her great dark eye already blurring out of reach. She is so huge, so factual, such a complete being. The daughter reappears in the telehandler and the cow is lifted by her hobbled legs out of the field, gravity dragging at her. The chat is minimal.

Out on the road, it takes an effort to speak. What will happen to her? What happens to an undiseased but injured cow once it's shot?

'Cat two,' says Ian.

What's that?

In bureaucratic terms, he explains, she's Category 2, easily recyclable: both her hide and her meat are good. Back at the depot she will be skinned, the hide will be taken by tanners for leather, and her meat will be sold on to hunts or safari parks or pet food manufacturers. Category 1 is the stuff you can't do

anything with – the stinky sheep in the back of the tipper, the animals over forty-eight months old.

In the past a dead animal had a use and thus a financial value. There are still older farmers who remember the days when the knackers paid them, not the other way round. Bone was fertiliser, meat was food, fat was candles, fleece was wool and hide was leather. Now, most of those uses have gone. The cost of shearing a sheep usually exceeds the price for the wool and dead sheep rot so quickly they're all just dumped and rendered. Horses aren't used much. Their hides are too thin for leather and most have had so many injections they cannot even be classified as pet food. All Category 1 animals are taken back to Andersons, placed in sealed containers, and left for the renderers to pick up, and the Category 2 meat goes either to local hunts or to the safari parks; lambs fed to lions.

It used to be that when dead animals were incinerated the resulting black ash was mixed with bitumen and used as road surfacing. Tallow became candles, horns and hooves were made into containers or utensils or boiled down for glue. The BSE outbreak in the late 1990s changed all that. New regulations outlawed the old 'dead pits' where farmers would dump carcasses. Now, every animal had to be collected and taken off the farm. Small abattoirs were closed down or issued with such an onerous list of improvements and requirements they went out of business. Fallen-stock operators either fell in line with the new testing regulations or went solo below the radar, or stopped trading. And, most importantly, the finances reversed. Where once a dead horse or bull at least had the value the knacker would pay, now it's another cost.

'Used to be,' says Ian, 'we paid them and the renderers paid us. Now the farmers pay us and we pay the renderers.'

At the moment it's Andersons' biggest outgoing – £100 per ton to the renderers: more than fuel or maintenance or the





charges DEFRA makes for inspections. The renderers in their turn are taking what they describe as 'commercial waste', cooking it up and making it into biodiesel or protein. It is in theory entirely possible that we could one day run cars off dead chickens.

By this time it's mid-afternoon and every time we stop at a junction or pause to let another car pass, the sweet morbid reek of those dead sheep comes surging forward, thick enough to seem almost visible. Watching the wing mirrors I see the drivers behind us closing up their windows and a man driving the school bus recoil, squinting with displeasure. If it wasn't for getting to a farm on the edge of Bridgnorth, Ian would usually avoid towns. Over the years he's developed his own customised circuit of anonymous country lanes, a private system of ring roads round every built-up area which allows him to keep the smell a safe 25 yards behind him. Once in a while, he'll get a pick-up like this and be unable to avoid going through the centre.

'That's embarrassing – I'm stuck in the middle of Tenbury or something and all the schoolkids choking and pointing and waving their arms in front of their faces.' It's other peoples' reactions which bother Ian, not his own. He's been at this job so long that death is just the smell of work to him. 'I don't even notice,' he admits. 'Once in a while I'll get to a job and the farmer will say something, and it didn't even occur to me. It does get a bit much in summer, to be fair, but it's not usually bad as long as I keep going.'

Oddly enough, the thing that really makes him gag is chickens. In the past decade or so poultry has become big business, and the number of units are increasing year on year, thousands upon thousands of chickens reared in huge sheds under audited conditions. Andersons now has several lorries just doing day-in, day-out pick-ups – the binned victims of heat-related

epidemics or the everyday attrition of thirty-eight-day rotations. 'This time of year, because it's getting warm again, their fans pack in, they have problems, so they have mass killings, freezers go down. A couple of years ago we had four lorries just doing disasters off chicken farms. We were taking stuff off the renderers. They were passing it back to us because they couldn't cope with the volume.'

Two more farms, the first a tiny place where a heifer is laid under sacking in a shed, the final one a big dairy where there's a dead cow round the back and a live calf which had tangled a back leg in the bars of the pen, snapping the femur. That was three days ago, and the leg has now swollen to twice its healthy size. This time the calves are all on their own, penned in a line in a long low byre in strawed wooden enclosures with buckets outside. The calves can see past the bars and watch us, silent and swivel-eared, as the herdsman picks out the calf, brings it down the line and holds it for Ian. The captive bolt makes a click like the latch on a gate, but the watching calves still roll and flatten with fear, stepping towards the backs of their pens as the herdsman carries the calf out to the tipper.

This place is big, with a Thai restaurant at the front in the old farmhouse and a huddle of signboards by the entrance pointing the way to businesses round the back: pet grooming, software upgrades, satellite phone services. The next has sagged wooden joists, windows patched with feed sacks and a rewilded Ford Focus growing dandelions by the silage clamp. The whole place has a general air of defeat, as if the buildings themselves are subsiding with exhaustion, now too tired to do anything but keep going.

If I wanted a random overview of farming, I couldn't have picked better if I'd drawn straws. Some of the places we've been to were huge corporate successes overgrazing the margins and doing clever things with dairy or plastic. Some yards are





scrupulous, others seem barely habitable. In a tiny smallholding at the end of a suburban lane (live ewe, disease) there's a man standing in shorts and flip-flops chopping up window architraves with a rusty open-bladed table saw while a family of ginger kittens pounce round his feet. Others have a squared-off, military tidiness, a strictly disinfected sense of control. Some places park the harvests of the most recent refinancing (new Ford Ranger pick-ups, cloudless Discoverys) on the gravel out front, or escort the visitor to the farm office along a recently planted driveway of chestnuts. In others, it takes a genuine effort to work out which is the farmhouse and which the byre.

It's past 5 p.m. now and the loop is taking us back towards the border. At the depot Ian drives the tipper into the big shed at the back, sorts the carcasses out into different categories and sluices the whole lot out while I go to find the manager.

Will Anderson is the fourth generation of this family to do this job. He's early thirties, good-natured, bearded, with a series of tattoos poking out from under his shirt, including a delicate blue-edged feather down his left forearm. Invincibly cheerful, he's only recently taken over the family business from his father Robert. Andersons was started almost exactly 100 years ago by his great-great-grandfather, who came back from the First World War and started taking scrap wool and pelts, 'the stuff nobody else wanted'. Having bought a horse and cart, Michael began taking dead cattle to sell on to abattoirs and started trading in hides. At one stage, Andersons had four different yards around the Midlands, but after BSE they were forced to shut down for a while. They scaled back, consolidating everything into the depot here, upgraded the buildings and did what was required to conform to the new legislation.

The 2001 foot-and-mouth outbreak, coming so soon after BSE, proved 'the thing that kept us going, really'.

Will himself never thought he'd be doing this job. Knackering was definitely not his cup of tea: 'Dead animals don't do anything for me.' When he was young he wanted to be a vet. Then he went to live with his mother in Bristol and got himself a degree in graphic design, but in 2008 the recession hit, so he came over to Wales for a year to help sort things out. He has been here ever since.

Will is licensed as a rifleman and will go out to an emergency in the middle of the night if he has to, but 'I don't like it. It's not my thing – that's why I'm in here. I like the interaction with the farmers, I like the interaction with the drivers. That's the main thing to me, that's what's most important: that everybody's happy.'

And there are benefits to being a known quantity. Because it's a family business and there are so many family farms round here, he must get places where he's fourth-generation, the farmer is seventh-generation, they've been using Andersons for a century ...?

'Yeah, but sometimes it's the other way as well: my great-granddad fell out with their great-granddad and nobody's ever used us again, and they just live up the road – it's crazy. They're probably calling us every name under the sun because my granddad shorted them 10p years ago.'

The upside – if you can call it that – is a very close-knit group of people and a line of work that isn't going to run out any time soon. Which gives Andersons a ringside glimpse of an industry shifting. A lot of their customers are the old boys, the breadline farmers whose sons have looked up from their lives and realised there are jobs in this world which have days off.

'The way it's going, farming is diverging. You're either getting someone who's got ten sheep or they've got three thousand.





There's not as many in the middle. The big farms, I think they're very much "stock". And then at the other end there's a lot of hobby farmers coming in. They're a bit clueless, really, as to the way it is. Because they're coming from cities, they don't really know about farming at all, and it's like, "I got a sheep here", and it'll be down three fields away, and I got to send a 3.5 ton lorry ...' He grins. ' ... Hang on.' He dives out of the office and returns a moment later with a piece of cardboard in a frame. On it is written: 'Andersons: *Animal through this gate, then through gate and through stream. Keep left to bottom of field, through gate into next field, keep left alongside of stream. Animal by tree. Thanks a lot. Please shut gates.*' The board is usually displayed in the reception area as a tribute to difficult customers.

Will sits down again. 'The old isolated farms are the trickiest to get away from,' he resumes, 'because they're the ones who want to talk, but they tend to be the ones who'll leave a sheep here and a cow there, and you have to go round and hump down the fallen stock because they haven't got a farm manager. But the only difference between the small and the big farms is that the small farms you tend to be talking to the boss, and the bigger farms you're talking to a manager or a stockman.'

And everyone, large or small, has had a tough start to the year. 'This spring has been very, very busy – the busiest spring we've ever had. Been absolutely manic. Started to get busy mid-February and we're still busy now. When we had that bad snow we were closed for two days, we went out on the Sunday and collected about ten cows, and then on the Monday we had about fifty-five cows. It's just been non-stop. You expect cows this time of year, because you get the grass growing quick and they get mineral deficiencies and start fitting and pass away. So we expect that. But we don't expect sheep.'

So a lot of animals aren't as resistant as they had been in the past?

'No. When we had that snow before [in 2014], we had a lot of stock, and then we had a quiet summer because what's left were all stronger, more resilient. And you've got better stock from that. You go to markets and the stock's worth more because there's less of it. It does sort of counterbalance itself.'

And does the job still get to him? Yes, he says, and no. 'It's like in hospitals – people laughing and joking, black humour. We do become a little bit numb to it – you appreciate what you're doing but you do become a bit cold. It becomes a very normal procedure, so you become used to going in, shooting the animal, getting the animal on and ...' He tails off. 'The most difficult ones are definitely bull calves. Everyone in this place hates doing bull calves. Worst bit is that they really remind you of dogs, because they're only little things. There's literally nothing wrong with them – you're just doing it for the good of the farm, really. They're just dead weight.'

Downstairs in the big shed, the tipper has been disinfected and the bodies have been sorted. Lined against the wall are a stack of biosecure plastic boxes used for storing the stock that can't be picked up immediately. In one area there's a line of fresh samples. In a separate bay a neat pile of fresh cow hides lies in a corner, a sack of salt beside them. The hides will be taken by tanners to be turned into shoes or car seats, the bTB samples sent to DEFRA to condemn or not to condemn.

Driving back after Ian has dropped me, the day doesn't prompt any big thoughts, only a kind of dry exhaustion. I think of the depot at the end. Ranged across the wet concrete floor below the white lights are the cows and calves Ian and the other drivers picked up today, the calves splayed around the big brown Friesian in the middle. If I didn't think it would be seen as sentimental, I would go and touch the brown cow, say goodbye to her. I wish I had.



# 2

# Rise

When I first arrived at the cottage in October 2013 Bert and Alison were still running the farm. Bert was then seventy-six and Alison in her mid-sixties, and the farm had been ticking along unhappily for a long while – 300 sheep, 180 acres, a father and son who passed each other several dozen times a day but never met each other's eye. Through the thick of a morning gale I would hear the chug of the quad bike and watch Bert hauling back up the field with a ewe or a bale slung over its wide red haunch. Whatever the time or emergency, Bert always took things at the same pace – low gear, low throttle, a fat wake of diesel smoke trailed over the field's edge back towards the track, a lamb sometimes gripped within the folds of his jacket.

When he wasn't carrying anything, Bryn or Come Here would ride pillion. The two dogs lived for the morning round, and would be standing by the door of the kennel long before Bert came out from breakfast. Setting out, they'd leap onto the bike and arrange themselves in the manner of family crests – *House sigil, quartered*; *dog, pursuivant*; *wolf, fanged, rampant* – according to a long-settled pecking order, Bryn to the left, Come Here to the right. Both of them liked to stand straight-legged on the bumpy bits, whiskers blazing, knowing their role was to bestow gravitas on the meanest of farm tasks and generally considering themselves far too important even to bark.