



I returned to Oxford for my third and final year at the Ruskin School of Drawing and Fine Art in the autumn of 2005. In the experimental artwork of my second year I'd stopped drawing, washing up on the shore of my final year without this habit. Drawing is a way of reading the world, especially the sub-text, what's going on underneath. The pencil is good for holding this conversation because it's a language, but it's not linguistic; and words so easily slip into the rational, the analytical. To draw is to leave intellect behind, to meander and to dream.

Now, to pick up my pencil was to be confronted with my inability to make it do what I wanted. I faced the pressure of academic assessment, and an uncertain future after art school. But when I needed it most, the harder I tried, the more drawing seemed to evade me, like a neglected friend returning a cold shoulder. I wanted to curl up in the oncoming traffic of my life.

This book is not about my depression that year. But the story it contains, a story about farming and about creativity, stems from the questions I asked in my search for health. I escaped Oxford for weekend trips to a relative's farm in Wales, where I was given monotonous, repetitive and dirty tasks. Shovelling shit out of a cowshed and coping through the cold to fluke sheep, to protect them from disease, distracted

me from internal cycles of fear and confusion. Gradually I began to feel the ability to reflect return to me, and to handle my thoughts with clarity and insight. The feeling that my mind was under attack eventually dissipated.

At this time, Richard Wentworth, the Ruskin Master, acting as both a friend and a tutor, gave me Richard Mabey's *Nature Cure* to read. An account of the author's own journey back from depression, it assured me that mental illness is not inexplicable madness, but an indicator of something else being remiss. And that health is real. It is possible to pinpoint vitality, for example, in our names for the wealth of birds and plants which we love, says Mabey. Nomenclature is an example of positive, symbiotic relationship between humanity and its environment. In fact, the two are not separate at all. We are also Nature.

I found my own clues to survival, to understanding my illness and getting better in sheep. Depression is a wordless grief. It is being detached from the place in yourself where you belong, unable to find your way back without the ability to express oneself. Conversely, sheep 'heft' to place, an instinct by which they know where to give birth, to shelter and to graze on a hillside. A hill farming family absorb this sense of place through the generational work of the farmer. He selects and breeds from mothers who demonstrate successful hefting traits, passing their ability on to the next generation. As the flock come more and more to embody a landscape in its genetics, and also make possible human survival in a place through their role as meat, the sheep bind people to the land. They function as both a metaphor and the mediator of a community's relationship to a place.

The word 'bereaved' derives its meaning from this relationship between a farmer, a herd of sheep and a place. It comes from 'reivers', bandits who arrived unannounced over the horizon of the English and Scottish borders to steal sheep; and draws its power as a metaphor from this, as an act of violence. To lose a flock of sheep is to lose an irreplaceable part of oneself: the trauma of the 2001 Foot and Mouth crisis, was not just that millions of animals were killed and their lives wasted and meaningless, but that farmers, hill farmers crucially, lost the entire genetic information of their herds. Although their immediate value as meat can be compensated for, their finely tuned, innate knowledge of the land is less easily measured or replaced. Often several generations' life work, the sudden loss of a herd severs a farmer's relationship with the land, and potentially his own sense of belonging. The metaphor of bereavement therefore is that in the death of someone you love, you lose something of yourself, akin to the cruel rupture of a farmer's relationship with a herd of sheep.

Perhaps losing the ability to draw was a kind of bereavement, as I was unable to articulate myself. I faced ahead the painstaking task of hefting again from scratch. Early in the year of 2007, having graduated from Oxford and the Ruskin the previous summer, I left London on an overnight bus bound for the far north of Scotland. It was the beginning of a journey around a series of fourteen different farms in England, Scotland and Wales. The island archipelago of Great Britain would offer me a new education as rich as my formal training as an artist, and travel to rural territories as undiscovered and exotic as any far-flung country. Whilst many of my peers migrated towards London for their first jobs, or took gap years abroad in a last hurrah of independent freedom, I chose to embark upon a journey around

the overlooked corners of this landscape. The island of Great Britain shares my initials; the place in which I live, stretching out beneath my feet becoming Scotland and Wales is a place at once familiar and offering strangeness. It is a place fit for a journey of discovery, in which internal and external worlds mirror one another.