

# Michael

In August 2013 we joined Anthony Hartley to help fix some wall gaps. He was with Michael Longworth, a younger man who has been helping at Anthony's Farm for eight years.

Later, at the kitchen table, Anthony told us that Michael would be leaving - he was ready for his own farm and had applied for tenancies nearby, but without success. Finally he had been given a tenancy on a farm in Derbyshire. He would still be farming, but not in Cumbria.

Michael's departure, and Anthony's sadness at his loss, albeit alongside optimism for his future, touched me deeply. Anthony's words, *'There's not many who ken the sheep like Michael does.'* lingered with me as I left and I was inspired to write a poem. This is the result. It's a counterpart, in some ways, to Wordsworth's poem of the same name where an older Michael stays in the valley and says farewell to his son.

On the hill that summer's day, grey cloud hung low  
like a lid.

Under foot, wet grass, bracken, and tormentil standing in for sun.

We passed Low Bridge Beck and Shepherd Gill,  
Walked beneath broad bog patches and Dawson Pike,  
Tracing the wall, holding the line between intake and fell.

We looked back along Duddon Valley, over Turner Hall,  
Onto a land of crag, fells, screes, tarns, trees and sky,  
Onto distant ridges of England's highest crumbs of earth,  
Across trails shadowed by shepherds, for generations,  
While above, two ravens, silhouettes, soared.

Michael's hands raised rocks as big as lambs, and heavier.  
As stones were lifted, passed and teased into spaces,  
And boulders hauled from the chill flow of a beck,  
Gentle banter and laughter, like moss on rock, formed  
around the edges of this symphony of work.

These walls, land's bones borrowed and stitched by man,  
May stand, unchanged, for a century. But on a farm this size  
There are always gaps, forced by unforgiving rains and snow.  
Today two hundred stones are fetched, fitted, back in place,  
Two gaps, three men, one rhythm.

Now the valley has a gap a man gone, a rare breed.

*There's that many,* says Anthony, raising four fingers of a weather-worn hand,

*That many young ones in Cumbria who could take over a farm.*

But now he's gone. *How will you find another like that?*