

## Eroded Landscape

*[Jessie Marcham M.Sc. came to Braziers as an alternative to going to university. After participating fully for a year in the life of the community she moved on to study Human Ecology and gained her M.Sc.. In addition, she has worked for the Free West Papua Campaign and helped to set up a Farmers' Market.]*

I stand silenced and stilled on the edge of the field, staring across the stony acres of empty plough land.

Behind us are the fungus-rich shades of Braziers autumn and our journey from ignorance to knowledge. We panted up the hill from the cowshed, searching keenly for the mushrooms that Andy promised us were there. Then exclaimed in delight and wonder at the giant alien shapes and textures, gathered close around to reverently stroke the gills of a huge parasol mushroom. Our faces glowed with childish pleasure, our fingertips so gentle on the delicate ruffles, brushing the bizarre juxtaposition of slimy squishiness and intricate dry underside. We strode on upwards, stopped again to cluster round a fairy ring, turned to survey the landscape below us. I love the cosy jumble of sheds, barns, garden wall and orchard nestled in the valley.

We spoke about a beautiful symbiosis between the mycelium of the fungi and the grass roots, mychoriza exchanging minerals and sugars in secret. We frowned and laughed in incredulity when Andy told us about the destruction of fungi through plough and fertiliser sack, about the ill health of mineral-starved sheep, about mineral-depleted vegetables on supermarket shelves.

On again and up again, we crossed the sunken line of an oil pipe that broke the miners strike and now feeds the cloud factory in the not-so-distance. As we scrambled over the squashed-down part of the fence on to the old green lane, I asked how first-autumn looks to Bolivian eyes. We saw again the rich colours, kicked through leaves blown in to sheltered gullies, and picked our way round steep-edged black-mud silver-mirror puddles. We talked about coppicing and pollarding and setting up a pole lathe by the old egg house.

And then we turned off the track through an open gateway. Now we stand on the edge of this desert, our chatter gone. This field continues, empty and barren, to the next road, three ridges further on. The ground is clayey and stony. So many stones I wonder how any seed could ever find a place to grow. Andy points out the white shadows lying on every ridge; the bones of the earth showing through where the topsoil has vanished. In the valleys, there is warmer shade of brown, but each year the valleys shrink.

"What are we doing to ourselves?" I ask out loud. No one responds. A fine rain starts, and I want to cry in empathy. What are we doing?

I turn, to find myself alone, and run to catch up in the rain.