

SLASHING Mag Merrilees

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Last spring I spent three months on a farm in the southwest of WA. Outside the window, while I wrote every day, the wild radish and turnip grew into a gorgeous waist-high mass of yellow and white flowers stretching in every direction across the paddocks.

A sight like this does not bring gladness to a farmer's heart, and eventually I was driven outside to do something about it. For various reasons the usual arrangements for paddock slashing had fallen through, leaving only one person, me.

The tractor and I have both aged thirty years since our last encounter, so it took some time, and advice from a neighbour (put the ratio lever in neutral – duh), to get it started at all, and even longer to get the slasher, a huge brute of a thing, coupled up. I achieved all that and I was prouder, chugging along the track, than I have been of anything for a long time.

The farm is hilly, as in *steep*. From the highest paddock you look down to karris in the valley (and karris aren't small trees). You may have heard the old adage 'never use the tractor brakes on a hill', puzzling, since you don't need them anywhere else. Nevertheless it would be reassuring to have them. But even thirty years ago this tractor's brakes wouldn't have passed a road test.

I reacquainted myself to the terror that comes with perching precariously on a tractor at the top of a hill with a vast expanse of weeds hiding every rabbit hole.

My route would never have won me a 'straight furrow' competition, unless the judges were on something. Every circuit I chose a different path depending on what felt safest, picking my way around the dips and drop-aways and going out through the open gate at the bottom of the paddock each time so that I could turn on the flat area beyond. Slowly the weeds began to vanish and the underlying clover to reappear in narrow green stripes, curving and criss-crossing, up and down the hill.

Needless to say, my slashing methods would make even the wimpiest local farmer laugh. But I felt safe and began to enjoy myself in a meditative sort of way. The machinery roars and vibrates and all you have to do is keep your bottom on the seat and steer.

There is an analogy here with writing. It's the same 'keep the bum on the seat' requirement, and the same satisfaction as the narrow stripes start to run into each and form bigger areas of smoothness, green oases in the undergrowth. There is the same sensation of grinding along in low gear, crawling up the hill, feeling that your progress is so agonisingly slow as to be non-existent. But then there are moments of sheer joyous inspiration: a breeze comes up and cools your sweaty body; you chug over the brow of the hill and see the forest stretching away to the horizon; an insect-man passes overhead in a minute motorised glider, sun glinting on his wings.

And gradually, gradually, the stripes become wide ribbons, the ribbons join at more and more points, the paddock becomes more green than yellow.

Finally you arrive at the point where you can count the remaining weeds individually. A bit more polishing and editing and you must make the decision to stop. After all those hours it's a harder decision than you could have imagined at the beginning, when you just wanted the job to be over. Now the temptation is to go around just once more, for the sake of the six plants still nodding their flowers beside the fence. And then you see another three on the other side of the paddock.

But you must stop. Fossil fuel will run out, and human judgment functions better for the occasional break. You can always take a hoe back later and knock the stragglers off by hand. You lever yourself off the tractor seat and make your stiffened legs carry you back to the house. Have a cuppa, have a shower, relax, you've earned it.

Here's my New Year wish for all you word farmers: happy slashing!