abstraction of using only words frustrates me—I write on paper with a
dipped pen and ink, and type on a manual typewriter in order to have
some three-dimensional activities with my hands—but again and again I
discover how far words are capable of going, both in the world and on
the page. The fact is, this side of the mind, nothing goes farther than
words. With words I am able to do those things that first intrigued me
when I was young, those things that made me feel most alive—I am able
to paint pictures, collect things from muddy ponds, dissect insides, make
things up, put on costumes, direct the lights, inspect hearts, entertain,
dream. And, if it goes well, I might convey some of that vitality to
others, and so give back a drop into that huge pool of what other artists
have, as strangers, given me: reasons to live.

New York: Public Affairs, pp. 49–51.

6 from Cider With Rosie

Laurie Lee (1914–1997), writer and poet, was brought up in rural
Gloucestershire. He travelled in Europe from 1935 to 1939, and then worked
in film. During the Second World War he was Publications Editor at the
Ministry of Information. He published many collections of poetry, but his
best-known book was, and remains, Cider With Rosie (1959), a lyrical and
nostalgic description of a Gloucestershire childhood before the advent of cars,
and modern farm and household equipment. It was followed by As I Walked
Out One Midsummer Morning (1969), a memoir and travelogue describing his
life in London and Spain in the 1930s.

I was set down from the carrier’s cart at the age of three; and there
with a sense of bewilderment and terror my life in the village began.

The June grass, amongst which I stood, was taller than I was, and I
wept. I had never been so close to grass before. It towered above me and
all around me, each blade tattooed with tiger-skins of sunlight. It was
knife-edged, dark, and a wicked green, thick as a forest and alive with
grasshoppers that chirped and chattered and leapt through the air like
monkeys.
I was lost and didn’t know where to move. A tropic heat oozed up from the ground, rank with sharp odours of roots and nettles. Snow-clouds of elder-blossom banked in the sky, showering upon me the fumes and flakes of their sweet and giddy suffocation. High overhead ran frenzied larks, screaming, as though the sky were tearing apart.

For the first time in my life I was out of the sight of humans. For the first time in my life I was alone in a world whose behaviour I could neither predict nor fathom: a world of birds that squealed, of plants that stank, of insects that sprang about without warning. I was lost and I did not expect to be found again. I put back my head and howled, and the sun hit me smartly on the face, like a bully.

From this daylight nightmare I was awakened, as from many another, by the appearance of my sisters. They came scrambling and calling up the steep rough bank, and parting the long grass found me. Faces of rose, familiar, living; huge shining faces hung up like shields between me and the sky; faces with grins and white teeth (some broken) to be conjured up like genii with a howl, brushing off terror with their broad scoldings and affection. They leaned over me one, two, three – their mouths smeared with red currants and their hands, dripping with juice.

‘There, there, it’s all right, don’t you wail any more. Come down ’ome and we’ll stuff you with currants.’

And Marjorie, the eldest, lifted me into her long brown hair, and ran me jogging down the path and through the steep rose-filled garden, and set me down on the cottage doorstep, which was our home, though I couldn’t believe it.

That was the day we came to the village, in the summer of the last year of the First World War. To a cottage that stood in a half-acre of garden on a steep bank above a lake; a cottage with three floors and a cellar and a treasure in the walls, with a pump and apple trees, syringa and strawberries, rooks in the chimneys, frogs in the cellar, mushrooms on the ceiling, and all for three and sixpence a week.

I don’t know where I lived before then. My life began on the carrier’s cart which brought me up the long slow hills to the village, and dumped me in the high grass, and lost me. I had ridden wrapped up in a Union Jack to protect me from the sun, and when I rolled out of it, and stood piping loud among the buzzing jungle of that summer bank, then, I feel, was I born. And to all the rest of us, the whole family of eight, it was the beginning of a life.