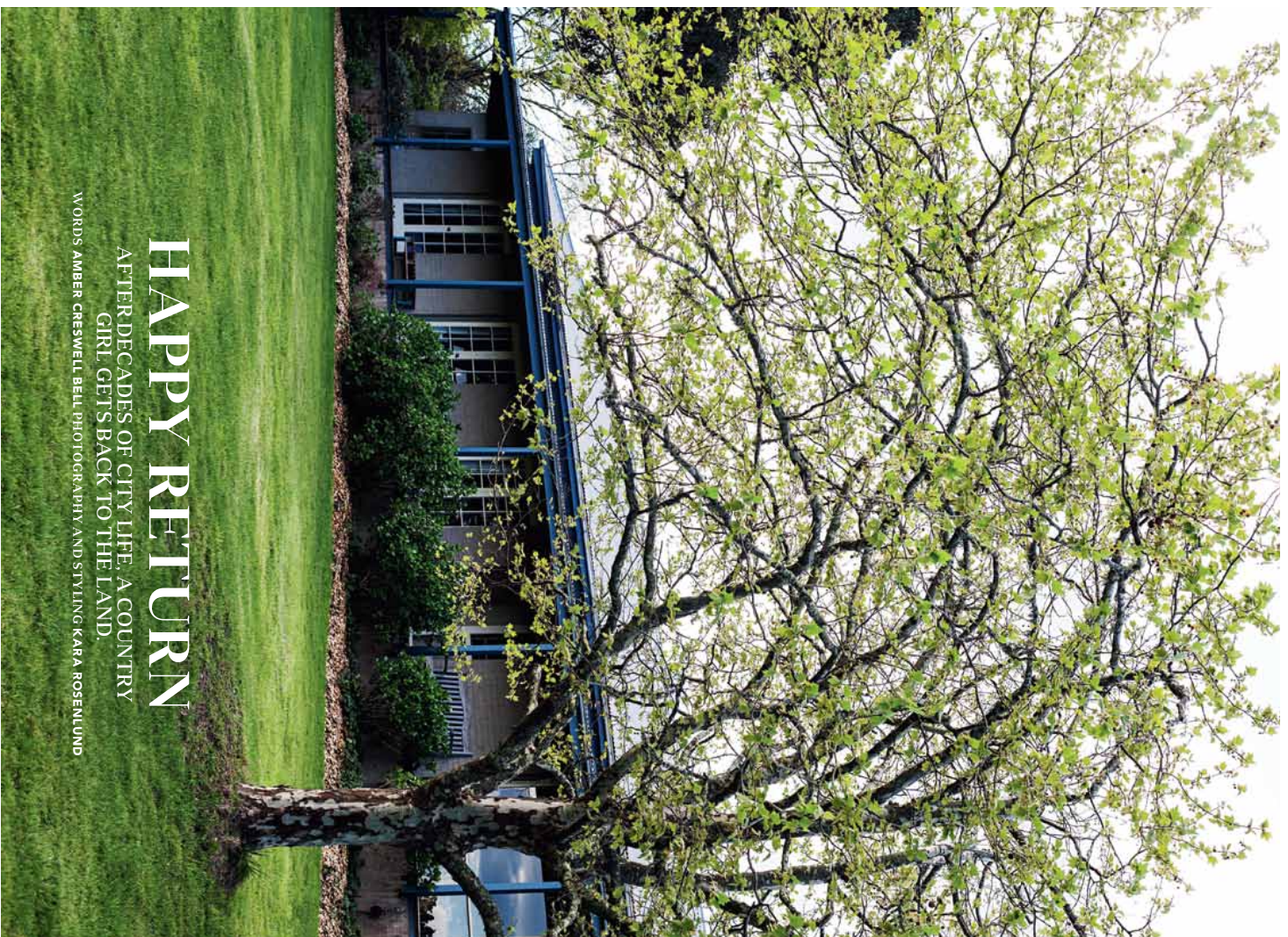




Daisies from the garden inspire a work in progress in All Wood's Southern Tablelands studio. FACINING PAGE A plane tree frames this view of the old farmhouse. 38 Country Style FEBRUARY 2015



HAPPY RETURN

AFTER DECADES OF CITY LIFE, A COUNTRY GIRL GETS BACK TO THE LAND.

WORDS AMBER CRESWELL BELL PHOTOGRAPHY AND STYLING KARA ROSE LUND



“I LEFT THE FARM... AT 18, BUT I THINK I WAS ALWAYS UNCONSCIOUSLY HANKERING FOR A REUNION.”



It may have taken Ali Wood nearly half a lifetime, but this country girl is getting back to the land. “I grew up loving rural life,” she says of her childhood on a sheep and cattle property, near Laneelin, 130 kilometres north of Perth. “I left the farm and moved to the city at 18, but I think I was always unconsciously hankering for a reunion.”

Around 30 years later and on the other side of the continent, the reunion is well underway near NSW’s Braidwood. At just 45 hectares this farm is not quite on the same scale as the 2600-hectare property of her youth, but the old house of rendered brick with wide verandahs and a tin roof feels like home. (“There’s nothing better than the sound of rain on a tin roof,” Ali declares.)

After beginning a nursing career in Perth, Ali met and married Brian Holder, an IT manager, and raised two sons Elliot, now 21, and Henry, 18. She moved into fashion, running her own label in WA for years, while developing a serious interest in painting — and when the family moved to Sydney’s North Shore in 2000, city life seemed to have taken a firm hold. But then chance took a hand...

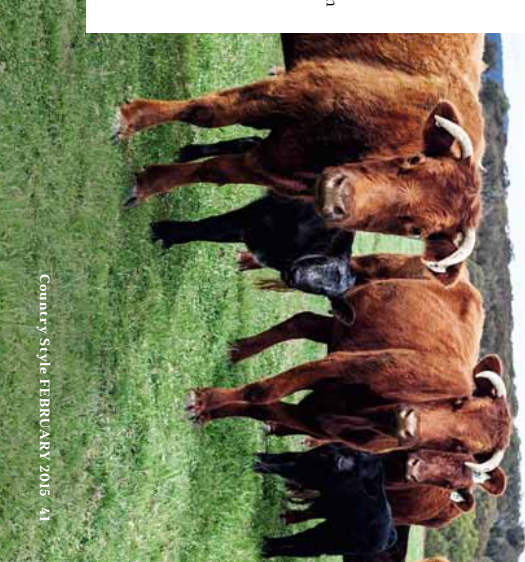
“We’d been visiting friends in the Braidwood area for years, staying with them at their property in Reidswale. Just four years ago they mentioned that the little farm next door was for sale. Joking, they said it would be fun if we bought it.”

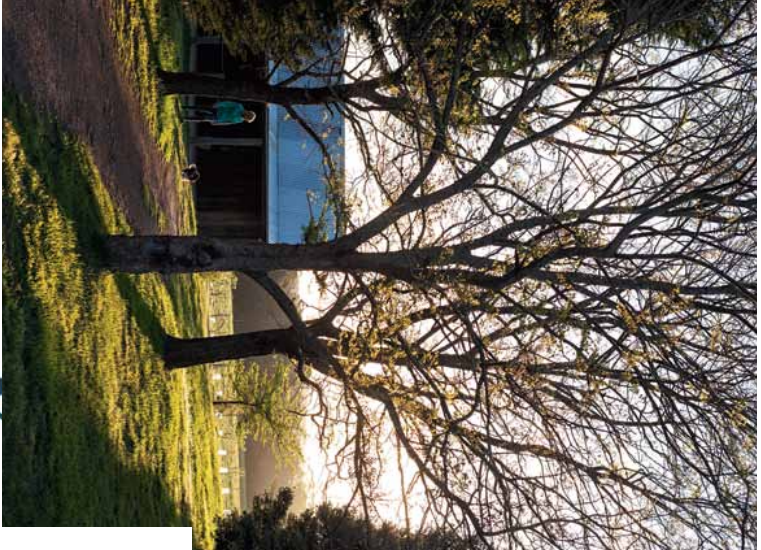
So an inspection was organised — and Ali and Brian immediately fell in love with the house, the garden and the stunning views of the Great Dividing Range and the Araluen Valley. “For the weeks and months following, I couldn’t get it out of my mind,” Ali says. And finally, in August, 2011, when they drove up the long winding drive with the front-door key, there was no need to think of anything else.

That week, Ali stayed on by herself and whitewashed the interior from end to end — “it had been painted a mishmash of colours. After that I had a ball furnishing it with op-shop finds that just needed a little love, and some pieces bought from a friend who was downsizing. I love recycling things...” >



CLOCKWISE, FROM TOP LEFT Ali finds some plain-air respirator; the workshop was built from recycled materials by the previous owner; some of the short-horn Limousins; **FACING PAGE** “I swapped a painting for the table and the chairs are from Winesies,” says Ali, whose oil painting *As I Went Out One Morning* hangs on the wall behind.





“THERE’S NOTHING BETTER THAN THE SOUND OF RAIN ON A TIN ROOF.”

REIDSDALE NSW HOME

A basket from Armchair Collective in Sydney’s Mona Vale has been turned into a lampshade. The quilt and pillow covers are from Bed Bath’N Table while the cushions are also from Armchair Collective. **FACING PAGE: CLOCKWISE, FROM TOP LEFT** The sun sets as Ali and Louis the spaniel take a walk; still-life *Sweet Dreams* stands beside real-life blooms. “We put in a bird house for the little blue wrens — but I don’t think they’re interested!”

“The idea was to make it a home away from home rather than just a weekend, which was a very satisfying creative process. For the first year we were constantly dragging a trailer full of goodies to the farm — I *am* a bit of a hoarder!” Ali’s artwork is the unifying factor that links the assorted goodies, and painting absorbs more and more of her time.

Her favourite space is the sitting room, with its double-sided stone fireplace and spectacular outlook. “The view from the large picture window is what sold the property to us,” Ali says. “This is really the heart of the home; we love nothing better than settling in, glass of wine in hand by the roaring fire, watching the light change as the sun sets.”

The garden has also brought Ali much joy. “We have added trees, including weeping cherries, forest panisies, crabapples, snowball viburnum, and the latest garden bed is all purples — lavender, buddleia and dwarf crepe myrtles.”

Meanwhile, there are some 40 Angus and short-horn Limousin cross cattle to care for. Although Ali and Brian can leave the day-to-day care with a manager who looks after five farms in the district, they don’t sit back and watch after the three-hour drive from Sydney. “We’re very hands on,” Ali insists. “We’re in there doing the fencing, whatever...”

And they’re there in all weather. While much of Australia is accustomed to the seasons being a show with just two acts, this region has more to offer. “Being from Western Australia, I’m relishing the changes. I see over the year in a cold-climate garden,” Ali says. “Winter has frosty mornings and beautiful fogs — I’m often seen in the paddocks taking photos while still in my pyjamas!”

Ali confesses that the pull of the country is getting stronger: “I spend as much time as possible there — Brian says when I’m in the city I just want to be at the farm. The farm has been a homecoming. Apart from being inspired artistically, I love the physicality of our life down here and the thrill of realising a dream. At the end of a long day in the paddocks, there’s a feeling that we’ve achieved something tangible and meaningful.” *

To see more of Ali’s work, visit aliwoodart.com

