

BLACK EARTH

by

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INT. AFRICAN STUDY(SITDOWN INTERVIEW) - DAY

ALLAN SAVORY looks me in the eye, pausing for a moment.

ALLAN

Everything in nature functions in
wholes and patterns.

HARD CUT TO

ALLAN

I cannot divorce myself from my
environment.

ALLAN

I didn't even like using the word
"The Ecosystem", because that
implies that it's different from
you...But we are IT. If you
breathe, if you defecate, if you
eat.. You ARE the ecosystem.

CUT TO:

BLACK ON SCREEN

(*Sounds of life-birds, bugs,
wind. Sounds of walking,
crunching on glass through an
empty abandoned space)

CUT TO

INT. ABANDONED OFFICE BUILDING - DAY

(Text on screen)

AMERICAN CYANAMID

New Jersey

The space was empty, but not lifeless. A slow, peculiar
feeling came over me. I stopped.

A broad beam of morning light crossed the darkness in the
room. It was the kind only a 9:18 a.m. sun can give--
innocent, warm and hopeful. The *Moonseed*(*Menispermum*
canadense) vines seemed to feel it too, climbing through
the abandoned structure.

Outside, *pine trees (Pinus rigida)* pressed in from every direction, as if trying to hide the metal and concrete shell. Grass, wind, and birds had become the new occupants--taking possession of what was once a confident, ordered place.

American Cyanamid began as a fertilizer and chemical company in the early 20th century, part of the industrial push that promised abundance through chemistry. What started with nitrogen and soil inputs eventually expanded into pharmaceuticals and industrial compounds, until the company was absorbed by Pfizer in the 1990s. Today, this 535 acre manufacturing complex lies completely abandoned.

I continued into the next corridor. The distant melody of a Song Sparrow echoed down the hall, in harmony with the faint rhythm of dripping water nearby.

Entering the testing facility, I startled a lone raven. To the left, a small purple *hyacinth flower (Dolichos lablab)*. I became aware of the remains of an elaborate laboratory. Loose pages and handwritten notes lay scattered across every surface--desks, floors, shelves. Gas cylinder racks, environmental chambers, examination tables--all left exactly as they were the day the place closed. An alchemist's dream.

Funny. Seeing this, I couldn't help but think how much it really had been like alchemy.

I notice something else-

Folded into the edge of a drawer was a discolored newspaper article. Parts missing. Parts faded. The title, written in the familiar Didot font- read:

"FEEDING A HUNGRY WORLD"

The article seemed to boast about the *great accomplishments of science*, the power of *chemistry to save mankind*, and the *bright future ahead*.

I felt it again--that feeling of dissonance, something like... *hope violated?*

A pitter-patter of sound broke my concentration. In the corner of the room, a little finch pounced across an old, forgotten desk looking for something.

(*Sound: a low deep hum starts to play through the scene..)

A gentle vibration began to shake the ground, almost imperceptible to the eye.

That word--violated. That was exactly the word describing the gnawing feeling I couldn't seem to shake. A sickening sense that something was wrong... that something had been wrong. Breathing in the rancid smell of mildew, I tried not to let it distract me... It was just that... I could remember what I was being.. distracted from.

(*Sound: The shaking hum drowns
out all other sound..)

Small particles vibrated across the surface of the table. An unseen force shaking...

The finch, startled now, burst through an open window to the east, returning to the trees and clean air beyond.

It was 9:22.

Outside, the sunlight glowed in the branches.

The wind sifted the grass, and life felt whole again.

(*Sound: The shaking hum stops
for a moment. Nature sounds
return..)

Looking out into the living world, I felt I could breathe... at least for a moment.

I lifted my eyes to the clouds. They were.. They were moving faster than they should be. Much faster..?

CONTINUE TO

EXT. UKRAINE FOREST - DAY

(Text on screen)

UKRAINE

The clouds slow, settling into a more natural pace. A softening of the light across the forest below. Looking higher--looking upside down--the trees appear to hang, clinging to the ground as if they might fall into the sky itself. The finch lands on a branch and pecks at a cluster of berries. They break loose. They fall. Falling up into the endless sky.

BOY(V.O.)
 (UKRAINIAN LANGUAGE)
 I had a dream.

A brown snail clings to the underside of a rock, its slick grip anchoring it to the earth.

The forest feels alive. A buzz with activity.

BOY(CONT'D)
 An ancient figure, a man, stood before me.
 Formless. Faceless,
 he spoke another language--
 yet I somehow understood him.

BOY(CONT'D)
 He asked me,

"Tell me about your time.
 Your age.
 What is it like?"

Seeing as how he was from a time long ago, I excitedly told him all that our age had achieved.
 How for instance, we had harnessed energy from the earth, the air and the sun.

How we had harnessed the waves to carry our voices across the wind.
 Our rockets to fly us above the heavens.
 How our machines can think and how it is that they know all things...
 And that even now, these machines can make great works of art from just a few careless words.

In great astonishment he listened.

Now moving, looking to the East, Beyond the trees, the land opens wide. Concrete rubble. Jagged metal frames. Gray dust marking the outline of what was once a town. Empty cars line a fractured road. A broken house there. The remains of a factory here. A church... maybe. An elementary school?

BOY(CONT'D)

And after a pause he asked,
 "And of the living world? How
 great is it?"
 "How are the plants of your age?"
 "How are the animals?"
 "How lush are your gardens and how
 rich are your forests?"

Then--something else. The rough shape of a television
 screen. Up close and covered in coarse pixels and blurred
 images. Plastic food? Plastic lips? Plastic happiness?

BOY(CONT'D)

"Do your fields stretch to the
 eye's limit? And do your grasses
 sing of His praise? Do your
 people dwell in abundance and
 hope?"

Plastic certainty.

I was silent for a moment..

Disturbed by his questions.
 I did not know how to answer....

...Wake up

CUT TO:

INT. EASTERN EUROPEAN APARTMENT ROOM - DAY

In his mid-20s, a young man awakens. Behind him, a glowing
 television silently mimes American commercials. His worn,
 dirty fatigues hang over the back of a chair.

ARTIM slowly sits up, collecting himself, unsure of where
 he is.

Black Screen-

(Text on Screen)

BLACK EARTH

INT. TEA SHOP - KHARKIV, UKRAINE- DAY

A painting. Maybe from the 1800s. A girl—a young woman in a faded blue dress blowing in a sea of tossing brown wheat. A dark blue storm far beyond her. Her dress and the storm both like one churning texture of blue.

I think I may have arrived too early. I decide to take a seat at one of the faded wooden tables. *DahkaBrakha* playing in the background, I found myself staring at all the different layers of wallpaper exposed in this old tea shop. Wondering how it is that this place survived at all during the bombings.

A small bell rings as ARTIM enters through the front door.

Tea in hand, Artim joins me at the table. He seems a little nervous about our meeting. Maybe I am mistaking his emotions? Struggling to return to a normal sleep schedule, he sips the warm tea, hoping it will wake him. I don't blame him. I'm still jet-lagged myself, and this tea isn't helping much.

Drafted in 2023, Artim entered the military after his family's home was struck by artillery fire. He tells me he was oblivious to the coming conflict when war broke out in 2022. He had assumed life would continue as it always had.

EXT. KHARKIV UKRAINE - DAY

Before we leave, Artim wants to show me his old hometown. One last walk through memory lane.

As we clear the final block of concrete rubble, he recounts to me his life growing up in Kharkiv. Well, outside of Kharkiv, as he didn't actually live in the city. His family owned a small farm about 40 min outside the city limits.

He lights up explaining to me the simple life he lived as a child. His parent's relationship. His cranky aunt. The dog that broke his heart when it passed away right before his 15th birthday. I can feel his honest joy at these memories, and can't imagine the loss he has endured since then.

INT. EASTERN EUROPEAN APARTMENT ROOM - DAY

Returning to his apartment, we grab his green army bag, all his earthly possessions, ready to catch the evening flight out. As he sorts through his things, I see that nervousness again. Strange. He has endured life-and-death combat. How could he still be afraid? Then he tells me. He feels immense guilt for leaving.

He has just returned from the front lines, and now he's leaving again--this time to travel halfway around the world on some vague expedition.

He asks me if I think all of this is worth it...

NARRATOR

Absolutely!

... Trying to hide that fact that I too am questioning this endeavor. Not sure if any of this is actually worth it..

It wasn't but two months prior that Artim and I agreed to travel to eastern Australia together. To attend an institute in New South Wales--led by Geoff Lawton, a leading practitioner of *permaculture*, an expert in designing living systems.

I ask Artim why he agreed to go. What drew him away from his family?

He pauses.

ARTIM

So much was lost in this war. I think maybe doing something to grow.. How do you say... To cultivate life-might pay for that loss.. But more than that.. I think, I want to give my family something better. I want to build something better for them.

He looks back, searching me for answers.

ARTIM

I am just not sure this is the key to doing that..

I don't respond to him. With everything he's endured, what assurances could I really offer?

He hands me a photograph. An old picture of his father--young, strong, proud beside a tractor he may have just purchased.

ARTIM

That was taken in 1999. My father had just returned home. Having told my mother he was just going out to get some milk.

He smiled at this.

ARTIM

What about you? Why are you doing
this?

Mmm..

I hesitate-

EXT. AFRICAN GRASSLAND - DAY

(Text on screen)

ZIMBABWE

5 YEARS PRIOR

The tall African grass was soothing. Gently blowing in the wind, stretching as far as I could see. We were silently waiting in the Land Rover. Elephants had just been spotted not far from us, and we had come to a stop, waiting to see if they would appear from behind the trees.

We hadn't come here for the elephants though. We were passing through this area, having spent all day with Allan on his 1000 hectare ranch. After hours of driving and talking it was nice to stop in silence for a moment.

Suddenly, like large ghosts, they appear. Not a sound made.

Allan whispers to us that most people think elephants make a great ruckus crossing through the bush. But in actuality, Elephants have a soft underfoot, and can move through an area in complete silence if they choose. Seeing it firsthand, I'm stunned. Creatures large enough to kill a man--appearing without warning, without sound. It was sobering.. and I couldn't wait to tell my father about it.

My father had dreamt of one day building a ranch using the methods Allan Savory had pioneered. He greatly admired the work of Allan, and I couldn't wait to one day bring him back here. To introduce him to Allan. I knew they would both hit it off. I knew he would love seeing Africa.

I just didn't know that that day would never come. I didn't know that my father would never get the chance to come to Africa.

INT. EASTERN EUROPEAN APARTMENT ROOM - DAY(CONTINUOUS)

I didn't answer. I guess I had been lost in thought.

ARTIM

It's ok. You don't have to tell me.

He took the photo back, placing it with his stuff, continuing to pack the last of his possessions.

ARTIM

But maybe you can explain it to me again.. Tell me WHAT this is. I still don't ..really don't understand it.

I knew what he meant. *Permaculture*.

And what "it" actually was. I myself was trying to fully understand. I had been chasing the idea for 10 years, and didn't know if I could explain it any better... When we're taught to see the world in parts--broken down, separated. It makes it hard to see systems. To explain things in wholes.

NARRATOR

Well.. Tell me what you do understand. What you think it is.

ARTIM

From what I can make of it, Permaculture is a natural way of cultivating. A kind of doing things the way nature does them..

NARRATOR

That's right.

ARTIM

That it is a technique.. Or rather a set of techniques that align themselves with the movements of natural systems. A sustainable form of agriculture.

NARRATOR

Yes... and no.. It's more than that. But you are not far off. Understanding the law of gravity is not a "technique".. But we still must understand the laws of gravity and the laws motion in order to build "techniques" -technologies that engage in flight.

ARTIM

So we are trying to understand the laws of nature? To cultivate life?

NARRATOR

More specifically, the laws of living systems. Patterns within ecosystems--large and small. And it is with-

His phone rings. Interrupting the conversation. He gestures the universal hand signal - "hold that thought".

ARTIM

Привіт. Як справи?

He seems suddenly softer. Gentle. And though I can't make out what he is saying- judging by his tone and flow, it seems it is someone special to him.

I glance through the room one last time, making sure we don't forget anything. I see that photo again on the chair with his stuff. His father looks so hopeful. So excited about the future.

I know that feeling.

That feeling of a dream pursued. I had to remind myself of this.. A dream always comes with the risk. Of Loss. Of heartbreak.

...But yet, we must still dream.

Artim's tone shifts-

ARTIM

Добре, люблю тебе. Прощай.
(Ok, Love you. Good bye.)

CUT TO

BLACK

Black Screen-

(Text on Screen)

CHAPTER 1.

LAW 1:

THE LAW OF RETURN

INT. WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY(SITDOWN INTERVIEW) - DAY

DAVID MONTGOMERY (*Professor of Geomorphology*) continues the conversation.

DAVID

One of the dangers of believing that we understand a system when we actually have just a rudimentary understanding of parts of the system..

DAVID

...is that we can do things that then present unanticipated consequences.

HARD CUT:

EXT. AUSTRALIAN JUNGLE - DAY

David's words echoed in my thoughts while we were cruising along in a faded Toyota Hilux. Outside, the sound of cicadas (*Cyclochila australasiae*) was overwhelming, my headphones struggling to keep up. I hesitated to press play again.

Dr. Montgomery was explaining the role soil has had in the rise and fall of civilizations throughout the centuries. More specifically, the microscopic ecosystem within soil.

We had landed a few hours ago after a very long flight, and now we were heading deep into the outback. Artim and Johnno, our driver, sat up front, talking like long-lost friends-- not like strangers who had met only forty-five minutes ago. It made me happy. It gave me a chance to watch the eucalyptus trees (*Eucalyptus camaldulensis*) pass by and breathe in the fragrant air they released. It also allowed me the chance to organize my thoughts and notes.

David wasn't just describing microbes or soil chemistry. In the interview, he was laying out a pattern that had repeated itself for centuries. Defective agriculture degrades soil. Food systems weaken. Social order begins to strain. And eventually, something breaks. His life's work summed up in one interview. He wasn't simply commenting on what was happening beneath our feet, -- he was asking the larger question: *why* does the decline of soil health so often precede the collapse of cultures themselves?

And now, for the first time, this pattern wasn't confined to a single society. It was unfolding everywhere all at once -- and at a scale never before seen.

David wasn't only describing the crisis. He was tracing the decisions that led us here. Industrial decisions, political agendas, and even academic conclusions. It was what Joel Salatin had also explained, stating that even the environmental movement has played a role in the decline and decay of the living world.

If this was true, I thought, the crisis couldn't be reduced to sides or agendas. It wasn't the surface level language of a greenwashed "climate activism" -- it was measurable, real, and deeply rooted.

And if this was true, my question shifted from *why* to *can*. *can* we solve this? And if so... *how*?

How can we turn chaos back to order?

I took the note out of my pocket- Hand written and circled. I read it again.

8 laws. 8 principles. All pointing to one thing-

TO BE CONTINUED

1. Narrative Outline

A quiet crisis is unfolding beneath our feet. Soil--the thin living skin of the Earth that feeds civilizations and ecosystems alike--has been declining in recent history. Historians have begun to notice the pattern: when soil collapses, cultures often follow.

Black Earth begins with this mystery, but quickly discovers the story runs deeper than the soil alone.

In the infancy of modern science, medieval alchemy led the way in the search for the hidden principles of physics and chemistry. Asking the question--*How did chaos become order*. Searching for the ultimate symbol of this truth-- The Philosopher's stone, alchemists believed they could one day transform the physical world into anything of their own making.

They were partly right in their hope. The scientific revolution brought extraordinary breakthroughs, but it also brought unexpected consequences. In agriculture, this shift slowly transformed living landscapes into chemical systems--productive for a time, but increasingly unstable.

Today the consequences are visible everywhere: degraded land, collapsing ecosystems, and a growing sense that something fundamental has been misunderstood--Raising the question--*How did Order become Chaos?*

Black Earth investigates this deeper question, guided by the work of pioneering ecologists, farmers, and scientists-- including Allan Savory, Geoff Lawton, Joel Salatin, David Montgomery, and others who have spent their lives studying how living systems actually function.

Along the way we encounter **Artim**, a Ukrainian soldier returning from war. Having witnessed destruction firsthand, he begins searching for something far harder than victory: the long work of restoration.

As landscapes, ideas, and human lives intersect, the film begins to reveal a startling possibility. Across cultures and ecosystems, nature appears to operate according to a set of recurring principles--meta patterns that go unnoticed precisely because they operate on a plane disregarded by modern science.

Principles that modern civilization has largely *forgotten*.

Black Earth asks a provocative question: what if the restoration of land, ecosystems, and even human societies depends not simply on new technologies--but on rediscovering the deeper laws that govern living systems?

And what if understanding those principles holds the key not only to ecological renewal, but to the renewal of human culture itself?

Synopsis

After returning from the front lines of war, a young Ukrainian soldier named Artim sets out in search of something more difficult than survival: restoration. What begins as a journey to rebuild his family's land quickly unfolds into a deeper investigation--one that challenges not only the destruction caused by war, but the hidden systems that may have made such collapse inevitable in the first place.

Black Earth follows this journey across continents and ideas, weaving together personal loss with a growing realization: that the destruction of landscapes and the unraveling of human systems may share the same roots. As Artim confronts both the visible scars of war and the invisible patterns beneath them, the film questions a radical possibility--that restoration is not just possible, but governed by principles we have long forgotten.

2. Key Characters or Subjects

Artim

A Ukrainian veteran navigating the transition from war back into civilian life, Artim's journey is one of hardship and loss, but also of dreams and hope. His story reflects the larger themes of recovery, resilience, and the search for meaning after disruption.

The Guides

Throughout the film, a group of pioneers and thinkers illuminate the deeper patterns governing living systems.

These include:

- Allan Savory
- Geoff Lawton
- Joel Salatin
- Masanobu Fukuoka
- David R. Montgomery

- Ben Falk
- Dan Dagget

Each offers a different lens through which to understand how ecosystems regenerate and why modern systems often fail to do so.

3. Visual and Stylistic Elements

Visual Style

The visual language of *Black Earth* contrasts two worlds.

On one side: industrial landscapes, degraded soils, and the machinery of modern agriculture.

On the other: living ecosystems -- diverse farms, thriving grasslands, forests, and waterways slowly rebuilding themselves.

Cinematography will emphasize texture, movement, and time: wind across grasslands, insects moving through soil, water flowing across landscapes.

The goal is to reveal life not as static scenery, but as a dynamic system constantly in motion.

The visual language of *Black Earth* emphasizes contrast.

4. Interviews and Footage

Primary interviews will include leading voices in regenerative agriculture and ecological systems thinking:

- Allan Savory
- Geoff Lawton
- Joel Salatin
- Masanobu Fukuoka
- David R. Montgomery
- Ben Falk
- Dan Dagget

These interviews will illuminate the principles of living systems and their practical applications.

Footage

The documentary will incorporate a range of visual materials:

- On-location filming at regenerative farms and ecological restoration projects
- Field demonstrations of soil, water, and grazing systems
- Archival footage related to agricultural industrialization and chemical development
- War imagery and environmental destruction
- Observational footage of natural ecosystems

Together these elements will visually demonstrate the contrast between industrial and regenerative paradigms.

5. Purpose and Message

Objective

Black Earth seeks to explore one of the most fundamental questions of our time: how can human civilization exist within the living systems that sustain it?

6. Audience and Marketing

Target Audience

The film is designed for a broad audience interested in environmental issues, global food systems, and the future of civilization.

It will resonate with viewers drawn to films such as *Fog of War* and *The Biggest Little Farm*, while offering a deeper exploration of the philosophical and historical dimensions of regenerative thinking.

Marketing Strategies

The project is well positioned for environmental and documentary film festivals, streaming distribution, and partnerships with organizations focused on regenerative agriculture, climate resilience, and sustainable food systems.

Educational screenings and partnerships with universities and agricultural institutions will further expand its reach.

7. Budget and Schedule

Estimated Budget

Estimated production budget: **\$999,065**

Production Schedule

Pre-Production: 1-2 months

Production: 6-9 months

Post-production: 9 months

Total: 18 Month