

Wilderness House Literary Review 6/2

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The Urban Goatherd

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It takes three days to hitchhike from Paris to St. Pons. I hop from a muddy Renault, inhaling wild thyme as the car grinds its gears and disappears around the mountain curve. What am I doing, I wonder? Here in Southern France? I pull from my pocket a pencil-drawn, handwritten map. "Look for a small cross beside the road," it reads, "then a clearing, and finally a trail." A voice from the trees startles me.

"Elizabeth?" Elton's smile broadens in surprise. "My cousin!" he jests, for we are third cousins, barely cousins at all. "I wasn't expecting you!" We hike to his *petit* stone house wreathed with white roses, hidden in the forest. We huddle before the fire, sip chamomile tea in the darkness. Finally he asks, "What are you doing here?" My question exactly.

I perch on a short stool, my knees up to my chin. The fire spits saffron flames.

"Love," I say, wrapping his blanket around my shoulders. "Greg was the love of my life." My fingers trace the curves of the cup's chipped rim. "Here I am, twenty-six, and Greg was my first love. It worked for a while, and then it didn't. Our love, our passion, faded, and then it died," I say. "I needed to go. Anywhere. I decided to backpack around Europe. First, I visited my college roommate in London, then a childhood friend in Paris, and now I'm here. I had saved this little map you drew the last time we met, almost two years ago."

During the next steaming September days, Elton and I yank weeds that flourish between the leeks and lettuce in his garden. "Elizabeth," he says. "My friend from the neighboring village is hiring a goatherd. Would you like the job?"

"Like in *The Sound of Music*?" I imagine the enchanted life of the lonely goatherd, singing in the Alps. I grew up in Holyoke, Massachusetts, an industrial city. I have never been on a farm, and barely recognize a goat from a sheep. "What's a goatherd do?"

"Well, she ensures the goats are safe and eat well. The females are for milking and the male goats are used for their meat. The goatherd leads the animals to trees and bushes where they'll graze, and then they shift to other spots throughout the day."

"I'm a city person." I say. "You know. Indoors. Sedentary." But maybe this will be like *Outward Bound*, I muse, where people pay for wilderness experiences. Or maybe I'll write a book. I don't know how long I'll stay or what I'll get paid, but "yes," I say. "Yes, I'll be a goatherd."

"No one in the family speaks English," Elton warns me. I barely speak French.

A few days later, I hitchhike to the town square where I'm to meet Camille Fontaine, my new employer. I spy a woman with a sun-sized smile and tortoise-shell glasses waving across the dusty market. She kisses me on each cheek, and throws my backpack in her tin car. Camille, I presume.

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We drive past fields speckled with fragrant thyme and crumbling ruins, until, an hour later, we arrive at a village of only four homes.

Camille thrusts open the thick wood door, where the spicy aroma of leek soup greets us. I freeze, gaping at the bare cement floor, stone walls, two rectangular tables, wood cooking stove, pile of buckets, ladder leading to the lofts, and the tiny window carved into eight-inch-thick walls. This two-hundred-year-old home has no heat, no plumbing, and only two bare light bulbs.

Camille beckons me up first one ladder to an attic, then a second ladder to a loft barely large enough to contain the mattress I will share with the teenage daughter for the next seven months. Climbing back down, it's time for work. Camille flips her shiny hair as she ties her shoulder-to-hip apron. My job is to peel potatoes. I curl my hair around my ear, feeling relieved. Something familiar. I can peel, certainly. The scent of firewood wafts through the kitchen, as she hands me a knife, peels part of a potato, then tosses it to me. Camille throws wood on the fire, washes some pots, comes back to me. I can do this, I think. Then I look more closely. There are at least thirty potatoes. The knife is dull. Camille takes a spud back from me.

"*Vite! Vite!*" she says. Hurry up! She demonstrates, peeling the potato in seconds. I pick up my pace and eventually peel the stack. "Now, cut," she apparently says. Once again she models for me. Zip! Zip! Her knife slams through the potato, drums against the table. Her potato is sliced. For me: zip, zip, zip, and about eight more zips, I have the second one sliced. Camille scowls under her auburn bangs. Her smile vanishes as the evening sun slips behind the mountains.

The Fontaines and I assemble on benches to eat our supper in the *salle de manger*, where a fireplace extends from one end of the room to the other. A black cauldron, reminiscent of Macbeth, dangles over the embers.

After our meal, Camille gestures me outside to a vehicle that looks like a miniature oil truck. It supplies our water. Camille takes the attached hose and fills two buckets. She carts them into the *salle de manger* to pour into the cauldron. We boil the water to wash the dishes. I fill my two pails, then tug on the metal handles. They slice my palms. Water sloshes over my shoes. I feel like I'm heaving boulders from the ancient ruins. I rest a minute, listening to goats' bells tinkle in the nearby barn. I pull, futilely, on the pails again. Finally, I grab one bucket at a time with two hands and waddle to the table inside. My legs and shoes are drenched. Camille frowns. Between peeling potatoes and carrying water, I get an "F" for my first day on the farm.

I lie awake upstairs next to Camille's snoring daughter, fixing my eyes on the rafters inches from my face. I'm discouraged, yet something in the air, the mountains, the simple lifestyle, calls to me. I hear the goats sing their soft sounds as I drift to sleep.

The scent of chicory and coffee wakes me. I stumble down the ladder and pour myself a hot drink. Jacques, Camille's husband, stands in the doorway, his feet planted like John Wayne. He wears grey, baggy pants, tied at the waist with a rope. "It's time to take the goats out," he seems to say in his indiscernible French.

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We mosey to the barn, where a motley crowd of goats shuffles—some brown, some black, long hair, short hair, straight horns, curly horns. Twelve sheep, the color of dirty snow, cling near the far wall. Mon Rosa, the cow, looms like a matriarch in the back.

Apparently, I'm more than a goatherd. I'm a shepherd and a cow herd with forty-two goats, twelve sheep, and Mon Rosa. The sheep baa-aa as the goats knock against their rope partitions. The only farm animals I've been this close to were at county fairs. I rub my forehead and shake my head. I'm so screwed.

Jacques unties the ropes, shooing the tribe up the trail behind the barn. "Allée!" he shouts. "Allée!"

On this scorching hot September day, the herd and I scale a hillside where sage sprouts in scented patches. Natasha, the herd dog, barks, dancing around us. Most of the goats trot to a cluster of trees, barely taller than I, where they hoist their legs to chomp the leaves and nuts. A tiny caramel goat with stubby legs finds broken limbs on the ground. His legs don't reach high enough up the trunk. The sheep remain glued together, nibbling the grass.

Jacques chews a piece of straw the color of his tussled hair. He points south, where the white zig zags of the Pyrenees Mountains spread over the horizon, dividing France and Spain and little Andorra. The 11,000-foot peaks rise like extended fingers, reaching towards the sky from the earth.

I don't believe in a patriarchal God, but I believe in something, and I am filled with that something's presence. The air and the earth and the goats and the great white Pyrenees' are all One. A soft breath washes over me, giving me an eloquent sense of belonging. The goats' bells ring like a Buddhist's call to meditation. I believe I am supposed to be here, here more than any place in the world. It is this feeling that has no words, but possesses me, that keeps me on the farm, even when the world crashes around me.

Jacques notes the sun's position overhead, his way of telling time. "Allée!" Jacques calls to Natasha, the sandy-colored mutt who nips the ankles of the straggling goats. The sheep follow like one wiggly worm trailing behind.

When the goats are installed in the barn, I head to "Le toilet." Outdoors, behind a flowered curtain attached to the house, two boards straddle a stinking, shit-filled, half wine barrel. "Le toilet." I sit on the planks, watching rabbits munch lettuce in their cage opposite my "seat." I rest my elbow on my knee, my chin in my hand, feeling not fear, but wonder and amazement. Life on the farm is like wearing a veil. I never know quite what is going on.

"Allée" I call to Natasha, my first time herding by myself. The dog chases the goats to trees that border a stream, where Jacques directed me to go. The consummate student, I extract from my backpack my current novel, *Lost Horizon*, a book of spiritual writings, my French text, my tape for learning French, and my tape recorder. I fold my blue LL Bean jacket over a rock and sit, rubbing the scratchy head of the *petit* goat who cannot reach the tree branches. He wiggles his baby horns, little nubs, into the

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pages of my book, laying his head on my lap. Each day I read, I study, I meditate. I close my eyes, repeat a mantra, absorb the spirit that emanates from the land. I'm like a monk, more alive than ever before. There is only one problem—the goats. I'm supposed to be a goatherd.

One afternoon I open my eyes from my meditation. "Oh, shit! My goats are gone—again!" Goats often strayed, but usually they stayed in sight. Not today. I might be a devoted spiritual student, but I'm not much of a goatherd. "Natasha," I shout. "Allée! Find them!" Raindrops drizzle from the pewter sky as Natasha flies down the ravine. The goats bellow, emerge from the trees, stampeding towards me to escape Natasha, who gnaws at their hooves. Phew. Everyone's back and accounted for.

A few days later, cold rains plaster me and my charges as we flee another storm. I burst into the kitchen and shake the water off my coat, surprised to see a young man with sharp, blue eyes and a dimpled chin standing next to Camille.

"This is Randy, our new goatherd." First I panic, thinking he is here to replace me. Camille explains they'll use two goatherds, one to herd, one to make cheese, mend, chop wood, and so forth. Sometimes we'll herd together.

My new colleague is small: five feet tall and ninety pounds, the same size as his brothers who are horse jockeys, back in Australia. Randy and I are stark contrasts. I am the carefree,

broad-minded American. I see "the big picture," and sometimes skip the details. With my dark hair and average build, I tower over eighteen-year-old Randy. While I've been in school most of my life, learning from books and teachers, he's grown up on a sheep station outside of Melbourne, tending his father's 2,000 sheep. However, we both speak English. That is enough for a complicated friendship.

During Randy's first week, we herd together. "You're Harrison," he addresses a mahogany goat with white splotches. "See," he turns to me, "his hair is longer than anyone else's. 'Hairy Harrison' we'll call him."

I unpack my books and begin to read. "Hey, have you read this one about the British guy who finds Shangri-la?" The goats' bells jingle as they shake their heads, ruminating.

Randy lowers a pine branch for all the goats who can't reach leaves. He brushes the bearded tufts of a small-eyed doe. "Look at her chin. We'll call her 'Chinny,'" he says, gathering nuts from the ground which he stuffs in his pockets.

"I mean, it's such a cool book," I say, "about this guy in the sacred mountains in Tibet." The goats nuzzle my fellow goatherd while he hugs them and doles out the nuts. I stop reading, gaze at Randy, then the goats. They dig their noses into his pocket, searching for treats while he cuddles them like they're his children. Okay, I say to myself. So much for my books. It's been fun reading, but... I stand, wipe the dirt off my pants, and stuff *Lost Horizon* back in my pack. "Let's call this one with the perky little horns 'Baby,'" I say. Baby likes to strut with the larger goats, but he barely keeps up. Already my favorite, he marches with attitude, his head stretched high like a giraffe. He doesn't know he's the runt.

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Randy squats next to an older, graying goat with curved horns. "Look at these ankle sores. They're from the dog. You know, we should never use Natasha." In one day, my fellow goatherd knows more about the goats than I've learned in a month. Randy acts reserved with me and the Fontaines, like a cantankerous old gentleman at a London men's club, harping on the woes of the world, sitting in an armchair with a tight collar and cigar. With the goats, though, he's warm, gentle, and more aware than I'll ever be.

Goat herding takes on a new dimension. We name all the goats, becoming like parents to our frisky kids. When the goats play, jumping against each other like Sumo wrestlers, I check to make sure no one gets hurt. I discover who loves nuts and who prefers leaves. I note Chuck, an older goat, has glassy eyes, as though he's going blind. I pocket nuts to urge the goats to come without Natasha. But mostly I spoil Baby, feeding him extra nuts and carrying him when he's too tired to keep up.

One November evening, when screeching winds seep through the windows, Randy and I hunker before the fire. In mid-sentence, Randy interrupts himself and dashes out the back door. I lean against the mantel, baffled, as the fire spins gold curls. A half-hour later, I snatch my coat from the peg and race to the barn. My friend squats in the back, glowing in the lantern's light. "Chuck's barely breathing," the young man says, "I don't think he'll make it through the night." I cough at the stench of the goat's urine in the hay. Chuck's stomach rises and falls like a broken bellows.

"How did you know he was so sick?"

Randy pins his eyes on mine, then focuses on the goat. Randy and the Fontaines have a sixth sense that beguiles me. The spiritual awareness I felt on the mountains my first day is an intuition, instinct, and awareness that grows from living closely with the earth and animals. Randy and the Fontaines tell time without a clock, they know when an animal is sick, they have dreams which foretell the future. They accept and are attuned with nature in a way I never saw in the city.

Chuck dies. His body becomes stew, leather, and goat's head soup. I mourn him, my first death on the farm.

As November rolls into December, winds attack without mercy. Snow and rain assault us. By mid-December, snow climbs halfway up our calves. I bundle myself in scarves and hats and boots, but still, I shiver. I brace myself against a tree for protection from the gales that lash like a master's whip. The snow reaches Baby's belly, so I hold him, my hands blue under torn gloves. Winds rip branches, snap them off their trunks. I yearn for the fire. The days grow darker. We herd for shorter hours. In the worst blizzards, we feed the animals hay in the barn. We trek the mountainside to carry water from a stream since our truck is plugged with ice. Still, I'm learning something I can't put my finger on, something ethereal. I carry two buckets with no problem now. I work more quickly. A kernel within me is blossoming.

A week before Christmas, I wake to sunshine. We haven't seen that golden fire for a month. I dance to the barn, eager to guide my goats. "Baby will stay home this morning," Jacques says. My flock and I barrel up the path, delighted by the warmth and the respite from the wind. At

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lunchtime, I nestle my goats, sheep, and cow back in their makeshift stalls.

Before dinner, Randy and I haul full buckets from the stream, talking, laughing. "Hey, where's Baby?" I ask.

Randy is silent. Then, "A family bought him today."

"Bought?" My mind acts like a winter tempest, flashing thoughts like lightening; I barely see. I put my pail down. My chest contracts. I scream inside myself, my agony pounding, echoing back. I gasp for air. I can't speak.

Randy hesitates, then lifts his eyes.

"He's going to be someone's Christmas dinner."

I pick up my bucket and start moving. It's easier not to feel while I am walking, but still, tears flood my cheeks. My "Baby" is going to be someone's dinner.

My feet move faster, slipping on the hard, packed snow. I unlatch the kitchen door, and pour the buckets of water into the cauldron while the goats' bells chime like a carillon on Sunday morning.