

THE NAMED AND THE CELESTIAL

Summer, with cows, on the *alpage*

By John Berger

The barometer, nailed onto the outside wood of the chalet, is still there. It has survived the winter. We put it up four years ago. It's not the sort of barometer you can buy in a shop, down below on the plain, where the rivers flow calmly to the sea; it consists of a small branch of a fir tree, stripped of its bark, and is used up here on the *alpage*, an alpine plateau at an altitude of 5,250 feet where, each summer, men and women from the village below come to graze their cows in the mountain pastures. Nailed upside down, the *alpage*-variety barometer has more or less the form of the letter Y, and when it's going to rain or snow the little branch moves closer to the larger one, reducing the angle between them. One quickly learns to read the angle—as with the hands of a clock. The farther apart they are, the finer it's going to be.

The underlying mechanism is simple. When it's going to snow, fir trees retract their branches, so that the weight of the snow they'll have to bear is reduced. And this reaction is programmed in the wood of every branch, even in those smaller than a little finger. More surprising is the fact that the wood is now so dry that it's apparently dead. Yet it still works, and we still look at it every morning.

Gustave, with his cows, has already been here a week on the Imes plateau. Gustave, thin as a branch of wood, with his way of talking like a lawyer. We'll be neighbors for the

John Berger lives in a small French peasant village in the Haute-Savoie. His most recent book is Lilac and Flag, a novel.

next three months. In the lull of the afternoon, on the ledge of the last fir trees, overlooking the cows, we talk about his cousin Henri, who died fifty-seven years ago.

I can't tell you what he died of, Gustave says.

No.

But I know what he died of. It's that I can't tell you.

Yes.

That ought to be enough to tell you.

It is, I say.

He was very young, Henri, and then this happened, and eventually he died at the age of thirty-two. You follow me? Gustave fixes me with his blue eyes, one of which, as the result of an accident, is blind.

Perfectly.

He is relieved that I've understood—at least one small puzzle has been solved. After a pause, he says: Of the three brothers, Henri was the best carpenter, far and away the best carpenter.

We both fall silent. From where we are sitting on the grass we can see the houses of Messy below, small as thrown dice on a green cloth.

There's a whole cluster in a vase on the table. Their flowers, no larger than a child's fingernail, are the color of purple blood mixed with rust. We picked them early this morning. They grow—the wild rhododendrons—high up, usually on northern slopes, for they do not like too much sunlight. We climbed up toward le Pic. Clouds from the valley below were being

hustled up toward us. White, gray veils hiding everything. Being temporarily lost up here is ever present as a possibility, and after a few weeks this benign risk becomes a kind of companion.

The sun was hot and dissolved the mist. Then denser clouds enveloped us. Visible or invisible, all the time on the northern slope there was birdsong. Stonechats singing like larks, and *venturons*, flying at waist level from one tall yellow gentian to another, making their *tchititi* noise.

Every sound changes up here. Voices become as distinct as those heard in the head. And, continually, day and night, never completely stopping, there is the Chinese chorus of cowbells. Now, in their vase, the blood-rust flowers burn darkly with a solar energy.



Just as it was getting dark, Gustave came to our chalet. We hadn't lit the lamp yet. He said one of his cows was missing. He had just been to fetch them from the forest. He hadn't counted them until he got them near the cowshed. There were nineteen and there should have been twenty.

Is she with the heifers in the electric park? I ask.

We go and look and count eleven.

One's missing, says Gustave, if she was one of mine, but she's not one of mine, she's a lodger. If she was one of mine . . . she's a lodger . . .

In his anxiety Gustave repeats each phrase several times. He looks much thinner. His clothes hang on him as though they belong to an elder brother. What little flesh he has has left to look for the missing cow. Only his blind eye remains unperturbed.

It's too dark, he says, to look in the forest, no moon tonight, no moon, so it's too dark!

I'm on the point of saying: You'll find her tomorrow. But stop myself. The missing cow risks little. To lose one of your cattle is, however, to lose face.

I shan't sleep tonight, it's stupid. Stupid.

Let's count again! I say.

Under the Milky Way, with our pocket



lamps, we count the animals again. There are twenty.

One was lying behind another! Gustave announces, and becomes his normal size again.

I go to bed. The next morning, before the sun has reached the valley below, he tells me:

I was thinking during the night. I'm going to stay here with my animals until the autumn. Then I shall go down to school!

School?

Yes, school.
How?
To learn to count to twenty!



ON THE ALPAGE THE COWS GIVE
THE GREAT MILK OF THEIR LIVES,
CREAMY ENOUGH TO HEAL ALL
THE SORES OF THE WORLD

After the long trek up to the *alpage*, the cows give little milk for three or four days; they are tired and perhaps they suffer from the cultural shock of emigration. Then the month of abundance begins; they give the great milk of their lives, creamy enough to heal all the sores of the world. The great milk is the result of the mountain pasture, of the fat green grass. In this grass the wild flowers are brighter than the same flowers which were in bloom on the plain a month before. Their colors are more vivid. The blue of the mountain cornflower, the magenta of the *compagnon rouge*, the ultra violet of the crocus.



The full moon comes up from behind the Arête des Troncs where Arturo has his goats. His father was a shepherd too. At the Arête des Troncs the moon must be coming up from behind Le Joratin. When it comes, it's always like a visit, desired yet unexpected. Watching, I think of all the shepherds I've known—including the one hidden in my own name.

On this horizon
engraved on each day
like the crack in the coffee bowl
cows become the size they were
when I was four

To the north of the cows
graze the rocks
named the Tall Ones
there where the moon rises
when all has been done

First a pink halo
the color of the dress
worn at a dance by her
whom Father they say
went barefoot for

The dress has no hem my son

A lake of pale skin in the sky
there where the boys went swimming
leaving behind
their clothes in the grass
never to be boys again

The horizon opens like a mouth my son

Slowly slowly the moon's
bone white head is born
and your body of light
slips trailing out
from where my God you came.

I go and say good night to Gustave, who is locking up the chickens. We'll all be asleep in a minute.



On the plain a rainbow is something that arches above you and spans the landscape. It defines the vault of the sky. From here on the *alpage*, you can look down on one. It falls in a curve, like a cow's piss, onto the farms below.



Clement, who has fifty cows, is getting rid of one because she no longer gives much milk. A truck will come this morning to fetch her for the *abattoir*. After the milking, when he lets out his other cows and they start to amble to Imes where they will graze all day, he keeps her behind. As we clean the stables, he says: She hasn't much longer to live!

A statement of fact. It's on his mind. Over the years Clement has seen hundreds of cows loaded into the truck. He never hesitates to sell a cow for meat when she stops giving enough milk. Nevertheless, when the moment arrives, he's aware of its significance and makes no effort to hide this awareness from himself.

As we leave the cows' stable to go and clean out the goats, he pats Comtesse on her rump.

My poor cuckoo, he hisses, never again will you go to Imes . . .



When there's a storm, we are all frightened, all fourteen inhabitants of this mountain. The weather up here is like an adult as seen by a child. Violent. Unpredictable. Much given to anger about nothing. Nothing? Anyway, there's nothing to do except pray. If the storm breaks in the middle of the night and we're in bed, we get dressed. Clothes can't make much difference either way, but it's a mark of respect. The metal in the rocks, which surround us, attracts the lightning. The thunder goes on echoing until the next clap.

Last night there was such a storm. The lightning with its white-faced light made every crag around us look as close as your hand. The storm was throwing rocks. The animals huddled together, dumb.

Everyone has a story about how once in the mountains they saw a ball of fire and how it came through the stable window and killed a

cow or two and then went out of the door.

You don't believe them of course—until you go out one morning after a storm, as it happened this morning, and there I find, a few yards from the chalet, a charred black perfect circle of burnt grass.

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As people gaze into fires, from here you can gaze at the world. The grass is turning lion-colored. A perfect summer day. Below, a little mist is following the valleys like a white river. Otherwise all the air is slightly blue—like the inside of a mussel shell. Everything is laid out below, visible or immanent, behind this almost transparent blue. Each chalet, each road, each dark wood.

This is the magic of gazing down after two months up here. The detail, the particular, the named, is visible; and, at the same time, what is unnameable, continuous, celestial—in the sense of belonging to the sky—is equally present. Near and far, static and dynamic, unchanging and ephemeral. Down there you no longer see a landscape as such. It is the site of life. More like an animal than a land, and looking at it, you think of the Creation, because you are so aware of the unfolding flux which has led to the present.

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On the far side of Le Joratin, a flock of crows is circling in the sky. There's something dead there, says Gustave, if there's that number of them, there's something dead!

It turns out to be a heifer. She must have strayed up from the other side of the mountain. Doubtless one of Edouard's heifers. Edouard is a giant with a Hollywood smile, a cowboy walk, and a reputation for being *insouciant*. Years ago he bought one side of the mountain, and every summer he pastures thirty heifers there, coming up to see them only once a week. The rest of the time he works in a tollbooth on the autoroute that goes to Italy.

She must have been dead for at least four days. Her eyes have already been pecked. Flies, as dense as bees in a hive, are crawling around and

in her anus. It looks as if she collapsed instantly. Her legs are twisted and her neck is extended as though by the weight of her head falling. I go down to the village to telephone Edouard. I'll be up tomorrow, he says, God willing.

Two days later he comes up with his tractor and trailer. We attach a rope around the heifer's neck and another to a hind leg. She weighs a good 800 pounds. Despite the slope in our favor, it's hard to get her down to the dirt road.

During the past couple of days the flies and heat have detached the anus, the teeth have turned a hideous gray, and the stench is really bad. We close our lips to it but it still gets down to our stomachs. Her hide, no longer shiny, is the same color as the baked earth over which we are trying to haul her.

Edouard believes she was bitten by a snake. A snake, or a heart attack, he says, offering me a flask of *eau de vie*.

Clement arrives from Imes to give his opinion. Lightning! he says. You see the purple mark on her udder? That's lightning. She was killed in the last storm, a week ago.

I'd say a viper, says Edouard.

I'm talking about insurance, says Clement.

Gustave arrives. I've seen cattle just give up the ghost, he says, a question of circumstances. In her case, we'll never know . . .

For the insurance—lightning, Clement insists.

As they argue, a passenger jet on its way to Italy crosses the perfectly blue sky and leaves behind its immaculate trail.

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If left alone now, the cows would make their way to the road that goes down. There is little more to eat. Hawks hover all day over the bare slopes, waiting for moles and field mice. In the morning the handles of the wheelbarrow are sometimes frozen. Apart from gray, black, and white, the only color left up here is the burnt-brown of the grass. The dogs can smell snow in the air. The mountains have changed from stone to metal. It will soon be Toussaint—All Saints' Day. It's time to go down. ■

