

DAVID LIGARE

Sheep, 2020
Oil on canvas, 12 x 16 in.



COURTESY WINFIELD GALLERY

ANNIE PENFIELD

Mercy

On my own for
the first time as a
shepherd in Australia

“We really should do something about that lamb. I think he’s starving.” I point at a broken-legged lamb tied to the side of the shearing shed as Michael and I walk toward the horse pen. Piteously bleating, he hops around. He has eaten the grass short as far as he can reach, his whole world on a tether. I want to save him.

Michael pulls out a knife I didn’t know he carried. He grips the fleece on the crown of the lamb’s head, stretching to expose the long neck, and slices his throat. Blood spurts from the slit, but Michael doesn’t get a drop on himself. I marvel at the trajectory of the blood—at the precise direction. Yet, my step falters.

Yesterday, after only a week of working here at the Boco Pastoral Company in New South Wales, I rode with Michael across this station and gathered sheep. Here, I am a long way from my Massachusetts home—my Yankee heritage and Mayflower roots. Three months ago I was exercising the English Thoroughbreds for the master of the fox hunt. Yesterday, I galloped recklessly as a girl on a horse mustering sheep. I worked with the station owner’s nineteen-year-old son, Michael, to a common goal, and I felt a certain authority; but today I am again a stranger in a strange land. I look down at the blood staining the grass around the small lamb, just inches from the toes of my L.L.Bean boots, wipe my sweaty palms on my Levi’s, swallow the burn of nausea that has gurgled up my throat, and glance at Michael as he releases the head of the lamb and it flops to the ground.

Michael wipes his blade clean on the grass, folds and returns the knife to his pocket. One less. We leave the dead lamb and continue on to the horse pen. I lay a hand on Pepi’s neck and his nostrils widen as he takes in air. I brush the dirt from his white coat and leave the tangles in his long mane. I place the saddle on his back and girth it up. I flip the reins over his head, slide the bit into his mouth, place my left foot in the stirrup, twist my fingers into his mane, and hop into the saddle. Michael is already on Cinnamon. We head up the dirt track.

“We’re heading to River.” Michael says. “Green ewes.” We move through pastures and gates, and each time Michael dismounts to drag the wire open. As we ride, he gives me a paddock name lesson. I have seen several already the past week, but I know that on this two-thousand-acre property there are many more. He seldom says more than pasture

names, but I am not seeking conversation. I am happy to be on a horse, on the dirt track, with the dogs on our heels.

After I was rejected from all my top-choice colleges, I deferred from my last choice. I set my sights on this: working on a sheep station in Australia. I had assumed a certain trajectory for my life, and I never questioned the path, but when I was rejected, my narrow view of the world shifted in a way I did not like. I didn't want to be reminded of how I didn't measure up. Perhaps having just seen *The Man from Snowy River*, I imagined myself on a horse in Australia working sheep. Riding like it matters. I could conjure nothing else real in the scene but the horse. I grew up riding, had no knowledge of sheep, little farming experience, and I had heard Australian men were chauvinists. I worried I would be relegated to a kitchen but for now I am on a horse.

I tighten my fingers on the reins. My left hand dangles below my thigh, just touching Pepi's flank. I squint at the ten o'clock sun as we leave Holding and head into Taylor's Corner. Having decided my hat is not worth wearing, I left it in my room. I bought it a size too small, thinking it would stay on my head in the wind, but the brim cuts into my forehead, leaving more than a mark. It gives me headaches. Without it, a great forelock of hair blows across my eyes. The sun tans my face. It's another blue-sky day in a string of them in this drought. I have yet to know the consequences of the lack of rain, but the topic percolates each night around the dinner table.

After an hour in the saddle we enter Patrick's. Michael opens the gate, leads Cinnamon through, and then pulls the wire closed. While he secures it, Pepi leaps, pulling at the reins, straining to run. I spin in small circles to try to discharge the "Pepi leaps" that threaten to dislodge me. Back in the saddle, Michael walks up beside me. The dogs have already headed across the pasture.

"Let's race." Michael points to the far gate, a distance greater than several playing fields. I'm game. Having grown up with boys, and accustomed to competing with them, I expect to be held to the same standard. I trust Pepi. He's fast. I lean forward and kick him to a gallop. I bury my hands in his mane and hold on.

I have ridden since I was four, and I can stay on at this pace. I don't want to interfere with Pepi. Strange this terrain: He knows the way. I stare ahead at the acres of rolling pasture land—tall lucerne grass hides the rock-littered

soil below. The stones, some larger than lambs, form an archipelago of rocks in the tall grass. Like islands in the fog, the rocks don't emerge until we are right upon them. If I abandon the reins and give Pepi his neck, then I allow him to pick his way through at a gallop, his legs firing deftly like pistons between the scattered stones. My legs tight to the saddle, I look to the far gate. His hooves strike the gaps with precision. Although a little scared by the speed and risk, I run out in front. Allowing him to pick the footing, I know he'll stay the course. This is self-preservation for us both.

I reach the gate first. Michael shrugs; I smile. He hops off, drags the wire open, and we enter River.

We scan the pasture and take note of the dispersal of sheep. The river forms the far boundary. An occasional tree fringes the bank but there is not enough vegetation to hide the sheep. As I ride the riverbank, I see a dwindling flow. The steep banks reveal the declining water table. The movement of the horse startles sheep away from the edge and they spill out into the field. Michael comes from the opposite direction. The old dogs, Zulu and Patch, irritate the sheep to move closer to each other. Pulled into a tight weave, they begin to develop a form. Because of the rocky terrain, horses and dogs are effective while vehicles reign on most stations; here they remain relevant to the muster because they navigate the uneven terrain. I love that this is a skill and a necessary one. At home, I ride for sport. Here, I ride with purpose.

"Push 'em up," I call to the dogs in a decisively Australian tone because this is what the dogs hear and respond to. I have been listening. I hear so much: the commands to the dogs, the words and inflection; the bushy tops of the grass rattling in the wind; the difference between how the sheep sound when urged and frightened or when plodding and calm. The Australian accent and expressions tantalize my ear. I cannot mimic the language, but I can strike the tone for the dogs. They hear me, work for me, and we are a team—a girl and a horse and a dog.

We have the puppies along on this muster so that they can learn from their elders. Like me, they must learn by doing. Jelly Baby and Ralphie, the pick of the litter, run the back of the pack, fully confident.

This station has a code of its own. There is only room for so many and there are decisions to be made, life or death, but also preservation by choice. According to the boys, the

other pups met their fate in a game of "clay puppies." They were tossed in the air and shot like clay pigeons. But like most of the stories told in a haze of weed and beer at night in the cottage, I cannot be certain it's true. Is this how they dismiss pain, to make a macabre game out of a necessary job? Puppies. I want to save them, but I understand this valley is a world of raw choices and survival. I accept the end result, the problem of too many bodies to support, but I question the means. The lamb's death was quick, but the death of the puppies sounds more like entertainment than mercy. Still a novice, I can't tell what is true and what's wild Australian talk.

The puppies are not very coordinated. They ramble along, yapping at the heels of the sheep. Their bark is bigger than their little legs. Jelly Baby, marked by a scattering of black and white on her limbs and tummy, falls and pops right back up.

I see the results of our work. The dots of sheep form a collective of two hundred, then four hundred. Less obedient lambs break away from the pack and I don't want to leave them behind. But they're unpredictable in their movements and I have a hard time judging how wide to circle around them. I have to change their trajectory back to the group. If I'm too far out and give them too much space, they don't move. If I'm too close, I send them straight away faster.

One breaks. I try to circle around, but I fuel his panic. Each time I break wide again, he changes course. He runs into a depression like a channel that pulls him farther away from the mob. I am on his heels, scaring him to run faster and straighter. Trapped within the narrow gully, I can't get out of the track I am on, can't get around in front to make him stop. I have gone a long way for a single lamb, but I am gaining, when the lamb trips, dives into the ground, and is still.

Oh God. I've killed the lamb.

Now what? Do I leave him? What's one less lamb? Winded from the ride and the consequence, I stand still on Pepi and catch my breath. Dismounting, I move closer to the lamb. He springs up and runs. For a moment I'm dumbstruck, but then I let go of Pepi and tackle him. I sling him over Pepi's neck and return to the group.

Michael rides up to me and says, "If you wait, they run back to their mothers." He's not pleased. Not even his alluring Australian accent can dull his high-pitched tone

of annoyance. I have wasted time and have slowed the progress of the whole group. He has not been able to move the mob without me.

I drop the lamb into the group. Michael and I each take a flank to guide them straight, and the dogs linger behind as the locomotive to drive this train. Only Jelly Baby barks. The older dogs have lost interest. We make the slow walk to the yards.

The four-beat rhythm of the walk sways me from side to side. The sheep bob ahead, and I wish I had my hat. I can't even see the far gate, the start of the race. The sun makes me feel drowsy. Michael smokes—a little slumped in the saddle. He is a striking figure on a horse; his frame, strung taut with the muscles of working this land, is over six feet tall. Pulled low, his Akubra hat brim shades his face. Shearing pants and elastic-sided short leather boots complete the image of this Australian cowboy. But he is authentic, and while it seems fun to me, Michael has a lot of responsibilities. I consider how many sheep he has to move with so little help and how soon the shearers come. I consider the responsibility for the lives of nine thousand sheep—less one today. A year out of high school, and he runs the property in the place of his Oxford-educated father.

The mob we muster will join thousands already in the yards. I feel how necessary this work is—caring for the sheep—and how raw. The dead lamb back at the yards, the live lamb I thought I had chased to death, the puppies that made the cut. In the bubble of this valley, my world is reduced to worrying about sheep, preserving what is alive. The remoteness relieves me of old values of people clamoring for status exchanged with cares that feel survival based. I've chosen shearing pants over Brooks Brothers suits. My hips shuffle side to side with the stride of Pepi's walk. A tactile pace, this bob of the sheep, this rhythm of the horse. I'm exactly where I want to be—a girl on a horse working sheep.

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We spend weeks moving the sheep from the far-flung paddocks to prepare for the start of shearing. One of our biggest musters involves bringing in one thousand sheep from Two Pillars. It takes hours to cover the huge pasture. After we have pushed them through Commissioners, it's too dark to bring them all the way down to the yards, so we leave them in a holding pen. Without sheep, we race for home.

It's reckless to move at this speed. At times the muster is so slow that to just let go and run is liberating. I have a couple lengths on Michael and Cinnamon. I'm going to be first to the gate.

Hair in my eyes, my vision blurred by wind, beholden to my horse, I allow him to gallop unrestrained. Staring down at the rocks, the sight of them coming into focus under hoof, makes me tense. My body tightens, hands grip and thighs clench, and then I no longer move with the horse but against him. I attempt to control his steps. This tension interferes with Pepi's normally fluid stride and could cause him to stumble. I don't want to hit those rocks, so I look up to the gate before us, push my hands forward and into the mane, and let him run.

As the distance to the gate closes, I need to slow down in order to stop in time. I lean back in the saddle to pull up, but Pepi doesn't respond. I don't want to hit the gate. I pull harder without effect, and then I change tactics. Instead of a sudden stop, I can reel him in, gradually slow him down by turning. Again, I lean back. I pull on my left rein, kick with my right leg. Pepi sets his jaw rigid against my hand. Though he resists me, I succeed in turning him and circling left. We're still fast, but at least we're not fast to the gate.

Then his motion shifts and catches me off-balance. His legs no longer stride forward, but claw upward. We're not running but rising. His shoulders twist. I don't see the fence until I feel Pepi try to heave his legs up to leap over the wire. He can't clear it—he's too close and has seen it too late. He hits with his knees and rotates over. I catapult from the saddle, bouncing across the tufted pasture on my face and chest, to a thudding stop.

Pepi misses rolling over me and is gone. I don't care where. Unable to breathe, I roll over onto my back. I've died and gone to Boco. My ribs compress, flattening my lungs. I try for small breaths but my whole body has collapsed, melding to the grass. Only my eyes move. The grass slowly brushes the sky. The blades tremble in the wind and the sky is so solid it's tangible. The heartbeat I hear is not my own but the heart of the land. My heart, my chest, my whole being cracks open and the landscape fills me. The land shimmers. No longer am I separate from this place. I feel grateful, not at being alive, because I am not sure I am, but to be blended with Boco. My body sifts into the soil; the bright blue thickens around me. I can't tell if the sky

washes over me or if I rise to meet it. And I want to meet it, but a shadow stops my rising. Michael. He stands between me and the brilliance.

His face is all I see. Then I look at my hands. They are smeared with my blood. I rub my face, touching myself, and feel I am again human. "I'm all right," I say.

"I'll get your horse," he says, and I roll to all fours, kneeling, thankful, before the rocks jutting out of the ground. I push the earth, plant my legs back on the land, and stand. I look from the rocks to Pepi. He is caught within the holding pen we have crashed through. Michael walks back with a horse in each hand. Rooted to my spot, an oasis between rocks, I watch him close in on me. Pepi walks fine. I press my hands on my hips as if the pressure will solidify me.

"I'll give you a leg up."

You've got to be kidding passes fleetly through my mind, but I know I have to get back on the horse. It's what I would expect of myself. And there is no alternative transportation. I place a hand on the pommel and a hand on the cantle. I can get on from the ground—I do every day—but I bend my leg and let Michael hurl me onto the horse. Gathering a rein in each hand, I sit tall and ask Pepi to walk on. Michael rides beside me, and I think he might ask if I'm all right, but he doesn't. I rub my cheek and wonder if the blood is on my face too. I guess it must be my nose; I feel no open wounds. My left ring finger throbs. The last knuckle, the tip of my finger, is slightly askew. Head spinning, I waver in the saddle. Pepi walks steadily. I am relieved that he is not peppy.

He carries me on. I turn toward Michael. He stares at me, at the blood on my face. I turn away.

"So we'll come back tomorrow?"

I'd like to talk about something other than my face-first skid across the ground, something that will keep my mind off my throbbing finger, my aching body, and that Michael sees me like this. I can feel his attention. I had been hoping to gather it, but not like this. I gaze straight ahead.

"To Commissioners?" I form my words slowly, chewing on them before spitting them out.

He nods.

I have been here just four weeks, but I know all the names of the paddocks; they come as easily as riding a horse. I never even knew sheep were born with tails. I surrender to this place. Perhaps an escape, this immersion on this station, but how can it be when I feel so alive, even after grinding

my face into the dirt, even as I feel my body knotting in the saddle. The swing of Pepi's gait loosens the growing rigidity of my injured body.

Falling is another way to merge with the life around me. Dirt is no longer just under my fingernails but is embedded in my skin and up my nose. Station life reconfigures me, beginning with my fingers. The days move as fast as our horses racing across pastures. The numbers of sheep build in the yards. But in the aftermath of the fall, my body slows. I accept this stilted pace as contemplation, like the quiet consideration Michael offers as he glances at me. I digest this moment of having merged with the land and this offering of kindness from Michael. By the time we reach the yards, my head has cleared. Michael carries all the tack.

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After a week of shearing, Michael and I move the newly shorn out to fresh pastures. Pepi sidesteps the lumps of tussocks, the bumps of rocks, and still maintains the tempo through the sleek overgrazed sections. The pointy spears of the poa tussocks brush the soles of my rubber boots. The kangaroo grass begins to take on a reddish hue of the warming days of late spring. The feathery tops of the foxtail grasses shimmer in the breeze. A hazard, those foxtails; they can spike a sheep's eye, causing blindness.

Michael closes in on me. The thin hips of our horses match up, but each time the horses swing around the terrain variables, we part slightly and then bounce together again like leaves traveling currents of wind, lightly touching and then separating.

We ride into the shadow Boco Rock rising above us. The even surface is large enough for the dancing rites once performed there in another lifetime of this land. It offers a vantage point to witness the effects of the drought—the ravages to the land, the suffering of the sheep, the drying of the river—a vista to regard the changing fortunes of this farm.

This drought exerts cruelty on its dependents, a slow starvation that sears more than the quick blade of Michael's knife on the neck of a broken lamb. The knife is an act of compassion this drought doesn't know. This land has shaped Michael to be fierce and strive for mercy. Resources are never stable enough to provide a comfort or certainty. The law of the land rules his heart.

I cannot draw any similarities between my worlds: the business ethic I left in Boston and the agrarian culture in which I ride. From population to isolation, worlds so estranged I can't line them up to compare them. The skills to read the sheep movements, to discern the types of grass, to gauge my pace to shape a mob have no equivalence nor relevance in the world of academic excellence, of stock prices, of pretty homes, fit bodies, cocktail parties, and manicured lawns. Maybe that's the freedom: freedom from comparison. By no longer engaging in a battle of worth, I have abandoned a life. Like a sheep breaking from a pack, I have broken with my culture, but I too share the inevitability of a return to the fold.

The grass has a sound, soft and steady like the breath of the horse. The sheep flick the foxtail seeds as they pass through. The slivers float through the air and rest on my boots. Pasture here is overgrazed and so we move the sheep to Two Pillar.

It's easy to be in Michael's company, working on horseback. Released from past disappointments and from future ambitions, I am firmly in that time on the horse where every motive is clear, every purpose achieved. I haven't debated my attraction to him the way I probably would have in high school: how a relationship would detract from sports and classes. Here everything is connected and I am connecting to the heart of this life. Moving toward him as I move toward the center of this station. In a week's time, he will ride up close and extend his hand to me, and I will slip my crooked finger into the circle of his large, coarse hand. The land holds Michael; I will hold only his hand.

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