Honorable Bandit

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Near the top of the Citadel of Corte, cultural and political seat of Corsican nationalism and the University of Corte, Petra and I, scrubbed, antiperspirated, coifed (her), and shaven (me), are enjoying a late breakfast in a sun-dappled restaurant al fresco while waiting for the museum to open. We look like the day after Christmas (Santa never appeared on U Trinighellu, so we had to make our own fun), the first day of school: there are deep folded creases in our street clothes, since they’ve been at the very bottom of our packs for a week.

The waitress has disappeared, which happens often in Europe near the end of a meal, just when one wants to pay the check and move on. This is one of those cultural differences that I ought to value—nothing is more aggravating in an American restaurant than
to have one’s plate whisked away (as it often is in our country, our best of all possible worlds) just because it has been pushed back for a breather—except that the Continent errs at the other extreme.

“Is she dead?” I ask Petra, who has her eyes closed to the sun that has come to shine over her side of the table, a high-mountain warmth that heats up the check wallet and my waiting credit card, as well as the leftover food on her plate, spiced with herbs from the maquis.

“Who is dead?” she asks, without opening her eyes.

“The waitress. Has she been taken away in an ambulance?”

Petra is clearly doing me a favor by opening her eyes, and by means of her particular angle of repose she has created by leaning so far back in her chair, she can see inside the restaurant. “No, she is right there.”

My hint goes unheeded; Petra closes her resort island eyes once again. Slow down there, stupid American guy. Petra remains in a state of lassitude, the kind that comes over men after sex, and I am the restless, chatty one; food encourages this gender role reversal. Petra picks up the credit card, sun-warmed, and places it against her cheek. “Mmm,” she purrs at the feel of hot plastic on skin. “This is a feeling cavemen never enjoyed.” Inarguably!

Nor, no doubt, would they have enjoyed a lasagna in wild boar sauce, our indigenous, incongruous breakfast. By scraping off my plate, I can see that the bottom is cast with the Moor’s Head, the indigenous, incongruous symbol of Corsican independence. This black profile of an African Muslim with a white kerchief, a banneau, tied over his eyes (or simply around his head?), it is seen everywhere we go, on flags, beach towels, fridge magnets, banneaus (banneaus, mise en abyme!), and now the plates, and it itches at my politically correct mind with its disreputable connotations—like the Indian as a baseball team mascot, or the connoisseur of African Americans identifying himself as a “Mandingo Lover.”
Ironic, too—for the Moor’s Head came from Aragon in the thirteenth century, a banner used to celebrate the routing of the Saracens during the crusades, and therefore a symbol of colonial rule. I had seen it quite a bit on Sardegna to the south, where it is more of a decoration. But the Corsicans have found a way to make lemonade from this lemon of a historical fact by spinning a legend, the legend of a lovely Corsican damsel named Diana abducted by Grenaden pirates, rescued by her handsome boyfriend, who, surprise, is named Paoli. The diabolical Muslim king of Grenada, furious as an evil queen, dispatched his best general, Mansour ben Ismail, to get her back. He took an army that performed the standard rape-and-pillage until he was soundly defeated by a plucky Corsican army, hastily assembled. It was Paoli, of course, who personally beheaded Mansour and strutted around the island with his tête on a stick.

Nationalistic movements seem to feel this urge to offer corrective service, as if we all live on prison farms, future walk-offs, every one of us. In Corsica, in Catalunya, in Basque Country, and Quebec, I have walked along roads and seen how they use black spray paint to cross out the ruling colonial language’s name for the town, as printed on colonial government signage—“Hospidale,” for example—and scrawl in the local language’s traditional name: “U Spidale.” Just as the island seems to be shaped like a scolding finger, there is something in this guerilla spell-checking that makes even the most incendiary nationalist underground terrorist seem, in my imagination, dressed like an aging teacher-maid, hair pulled back in a severe bun, girded with cat-eye glasses, a pointer, and a big red marking pen. And has, after seeing the “Wanted” signs at the Marseilles boat terminal (the other) number 2, been sleeping in a wrinkled, maquis-snagged skirt-and-sweater set.

I think that I am afraid, a little, of this purifying process, the “Francesi Fora!” graffiti, the exclusionary tactics of the independence-seekers rather than those inclusive—the house-proud friendliness I
find when visiting these noncountry countries (I recall one afternoon in Basque San Sebastian looking out the window of a restaurant at a bombed and burned bus while the hearty chef offered us big cups of pacharan, the Basque liqueur specialty).

I understand the impulse, to protect and conserve the culture; without borders, what, after all, can save a language, a people? There are more people who can speak Klingon than Navajo; Hebrew was all but dead until Israel was given a homeland. The Palestinians, thus, fight ferociously for a patch of land to plant a language on. Corte, I think, as I look around me, is a big fort on a big rock at what is nearly the geographical center of the island.

“Francesi Fora!” Are you talking to me? I can’t help but feel the scolding, especially as a Yankee, especially as a spineless Yankee pretending to be a Canadian. This nation that I’m from, it’s far from pure, and far from the model I’d press upon Corsica’s Front Corse Nationaliste Liberation.

The waitress, after all, proves even to me that she is alive and well, and comes to take the sensuous hot credit card away from Petra in order to put it to the use for which it was truly made. Petra makes a frustrated noise when she has to let the card go, a noise they’d use to imitate a toddler with their toy taken from them, a German toddler noise rather than an English toddler noise. “Meh,” I approximate here.

Still, the waitress recognizes that we are speaking in English and asks us where we are from. I glance at Petra and say it again, though were I hooked up to a polygraph I would pump a scribble the way an 8.0 earthquake would jag across a seismograph: “Canada.”

The cock crows a second time.

Lots of Canadians come here, or some, anyway, from Quebec, enjoying simultaneously the ease of language and the fellowship of the un-nationed. It’s funny how like seeks like among the French, although Petra and I avoided our compatriots of both language and
country. On the table, each of the packets in the sugar rack have little features on special places throughout the world: Quebec, Fiji, Les Seychelles, some obscure island off the coast of Australia—what a coincidence! They are all French-speaking places! If an alien came and grabbed nothing but these sugar packets and pieced together our world, they would believe we write only in long nearly ungrammatical (yet delightfully rhetorical) sentences and think cheese can easily replace dessert.

We get up to wander to the center of Corte to find the grand, if lugubrious, statue of Pascal Paoli, the godfather of Corsica. It is almost a requirement of visitors to take photos of the eighteenth-century bullet holes riddling the walls of the ancient houses facing in on this square, over his shoulder, up where he’s pointing, featured and easy to spot, like proud flesh on a horse.

How is it that the majority of my best friends from outside the United States are nationalists of countries that have no borders? Catalans, Welsh, Basques, Palestinians, Quebecois. Each of them has their own language, or at least some dialect to adjust to. They are quick to give me nicknames in their own language, as if they might infect me, too, with the language. In Basque, I’m “Ohinandi,” Bigfoot; in Catalan, “La Mangui,” The Lady Thief. I love my friends from Northern Spain quite dearly, but getting to know Catalan is like a wearying subplot to an otherwise potboiler of a mystery: how can I improve Spanish when the people to whom I need to speak it are grudgingly listening to me and would rather be speaking to me in English? And what right do I have to complain? I am a representative of the prevailing power.

And as a representative of the prevailing power, there are things I simply can’t write, not with any justice. This is a bearable burden, but I want just now to write, “There are things one simply can’t
write any more.” But that is what I wanted to write even more than what I should have written, even more rigorously: “There are things one simply should never have written.” The things that shouldn’t be written are the condescending things, the generalizations. Corsicans are obsessed with pig flesh! The Germans use the word “stupid” far too often! Ugh, the French, and their . . . their . . . long sentences! And you Americans—you only have one kind of mustard—and you call it French’s!

When I pick through the library of books on Corsica, a surprisingly slim collection, there are well-written but wildly reckless thoughts among the pages. In the 1920s, the freewheeling British woman named Rene Juta travels alone to the island in order to meet her giddy artist brother Jan (and by giddy, I suspect she means something else; my father refers to this sort of men, the sort of men like me, as “squirrely”). She is recognized throughout the island villages for her green snakeskin shoes, and hangs around with a fuming D. H. Lawrence and her squirrely artist brother. Of Corte, where Petra and I had now arrived, Juta wrote in Concerning Corsica, “Corte, like all the inland Corsican towns, looks like a forlorn hope or a disaster interpreted in mortarless stone. Exquisitely situated over the Restonica river, its gaunt blackened houses tower up into pinnacles of ruin.”

Power rises and falls. Seneca hated Corsica, cursed its honey, and claimed the Restonica polluted. Boswell, in his book, “Seneca certainly never saw the Restonica, other wise he would never have said, that Corsica had not ‘haústus aquae,’ a draught of water.” Corte was at another high-water mark when Boswell dropped by. And the Corte that Petra and I encounter is nothing like the ruin Juta encountered in the Roaring Twenties, but considered now the capitol, the spiritual and muscular center of Corsican tradition and dreams of autonomy. Travelers destroy what they seek, and sometimes vice versa.
How strange it was to awaken earlier this morning in a luxury hotel rather than a muddy tent, in a bed with linens like those in a hospital, the sound of cars rather than the tinkling of cowbells. I felt in the wrong place. There were reminders, so that the wrenching wasn't anything like jet lag—the mind could catch up with the body by making transitions. For example, the stone scree of the GR is the same sort they spread under and along railroad tracks, over which the on-board toilets leak freely, various locomotive excretions are also jettisoned. I view all scree with an identical nervous avoidance, and give a nod of gratitude for all transitional material.

Coming into Corte from the train station was a culture shock, and when we walked along and saw the various dorky things everyone was doing—both tourists (taking pictures of nothing from train windows, talking incessantly of nothing, ignoring beautiful scenery reading their own newspapers purchased at the kiosk, full of news of nothing) and locals (not bathing, or roaring wildly through the street in Clios)—Petra said, “we are with stupid people again.” Condescending, but true: in the high mountains of the GR20, there are arrogant people, Roosters, annoying people, but they had to have a certain level of self-preserving intelligence.

But it’s so cruel to speak poorly of fellow tourists, because everybody can be an idiot when out of one’s native element. The other, or another, good reason to travel is to make a fool of one’s self at least one time for as many places as there are on the itinerary, so that if one returns, one won’t do it twice (and one should never return to the same place; it’s foolish). But how can we help it? The contempt one has for other tourists is similar to the contempt a mother has for other mothers’ children; those babies are all crap, and mine and ours are perfect.

What I have is more contempt for mistakes people make over and over, en masse. After our unlikely breakfast, we walk up one of the many cobbled ramps that lead to the very tip-top, the belvedere
to the south of the Citadel of Corte, where years of teenagers retest the effects of gravity on bottles over the rocks below. Look: two of them are engaged in research right now! At this moment of the test, they are thrilled. “Yes,” is the conclusion of the experiment: “Gravity is still working. We can all rest easy. For the moment. We’ll be back in an hour to check it again.” After the test, we are all in worse shape than before, for, when they leave, bored again, Petra and I peer over to get a look at the base of the wall: an ever-growing garbage heap, very picturesque.

Petra and I go into any number of the cafés to take in big boulles of black coffee and listen to the locals make noise. It reminds us a little of the gîtes after ten in the morning along the GR20, full of women, clucking French as if they were in a henhouse, missing the roosters, out scratching at the ground outside some refuge miles from here.

What I want to write is, “Corsica is an obstreperous island, a people voted most likely, if there is a bar nearby, to get into a bar fight.” I want to write, “Corsican men will not tell you anything about themselves but will ask you a hundred questions about yourself, and only unbutton their minds with a little drink in them.” I want to write, “Corsican women walk behind their men with a sharp stick, poking them forward into deeds they might not likely do otherwise, sometimes deeds that are not wise.” I want to write, “The dream of a free independent Corsica seems driven by an idealism that is rooted in male vanity and female superstition.” But all of these sweeping generalizations are too general. Based on one visit, one pass through a place at one specific time. And one ought never go a second time.

And the danger of generalizations seems to reside in being too specific. You might say, “The French look beautiful and are prone to moles,” which could be acceptable, and then you write, “On the plane ride here, the French behaved like we behaved when a
substitute teacher came in to cover our classroom in middle school,”
and then you start toward trouble; it’s just one planeful of French
people you’re talking about, and one step away from bigotry.

So you retreat to general compliments, which always seem ac-
ceptable to any culture: “The French, they sure like to cook!” or
“Gosh, but the honey on Corsica is superior!” But even complimen-
tary chauvinism seems dangerous. When George Orwell gives hom-
age to Catalunya, he is as likely to fall into these traps of chauvinism
and condescension, a man from the world of power visiting upon
the powerless his sympathy—and that patronizing, cloying charity.
The powerful and the powerless: this is the history of melodrama,
even when the powerful are not tying the powerless down to the rail-
road tracks with a twist of the mustachios.

Petra makes her own generalizations too, but her scorn is re-
served for the Dutch, who often caravan into her country carrying
their own water and potatoes, an insult to German cleanliness and
economy. “The way to keep the Dutch away,” says Petra, while flipp-
ing through her newspaper quickly—and whatever she’s doing
when she speaks of the Dutch, she does a little more quickly—walk,
stir soup, sweep the floor—“is to introduce extra fees for everything.
They won’t come if they have to pay extra.” She makes me laugh, for
she knows about my unsuccessful relationship with the Dutch, or a
Dutch, and of my needless and overfunded research into making it
successful (Nope, still doesn’t work!) while attending a certain Hol-
landaise Ecole of Hard Knocks. All along the GR20, I encourage her
to tell me more of such words of wisdom, and she’s happy to share,
but while she wraps her mind around her disdain, her body quickly
follows, and she may start running along the trail or stir the soup so
violently that it spatters and scalds; the finish on the flooring must
be reapplied, for the broom has broken through it, she sweeps so vig-
orously. “Do you know why they have liberalized drugs in Amster-
dam?” Ooh, a funny riddle! “It is so they can forget that nobody
would ever miss them if they were flooded away.” I sink down without a punchline to buoy me up—no wit, just a bit of poison. Perhaps that’s how they tell jokes in Germany, or Austria.

A friend of mine doing Peace Corps work on the island of Madagascar got food poisoning; these things happen. They told him that only American travelers come to their island and expect to have hard stools. I must admit: I have this expectation, and when reality falls short of these expectations—not just on Madagascar, but anywhere not on home soil (if you will)—I consider the failure my own, my body’s, my good judgment. Does this mean, I wonder, whether in having overly high standards for myself, I harbor lower opinions of anywhere not here, or at least anywhere I don’t have a solid stool? Is it secret prejudice, prejudice through condescension?

Perhaps it is this desire to map a place, to set it down in a guidebook of one’s own making, and guidebooks require all sorts of sassy judgments and overly broad generalizations. It attempts to bring The Other under control. But it never works.

At the museum of the Citadel, I read in the broken but well-meaning English pamphlet that this is “Pascal Paoli, leader of Corsica between 1755 and 1769, an unlighted despot.” The history of Corsica in recent centuries is about the Genoans and the French, and several sorts both native and foreign who wanted Corsica to be or not to be part of the Genoan empire. Paoli was one who wanted not. Nobody was very successful in this not wanting.

There is a ferocity in every scrap of history presented to us in the museum. The nationalist movement notwithstanding, there is cast over all this business of the vendetta, for example. In the gift shop, you can buy your own souvenir vendetta stiletto, sleek, cross-shaped, elegant, pearl-handled: aestheticized violence, seventy euros.
I knew about vendettas long before I’d heard of the maquis: blood feuds. It’s the stuff of nineteenth-century novels and swashbuckling movies. Vendettas are limned (for me) with a slanted, low-class light through the hillbilly Hatfield-McCoy business but tarted up by de Maupassant and Dumas. The tradition may be as old as the first century, BC, when the Roman historian Diodorus Siculus suggested that the Goths brought it over (first this, then Marilyn Manson and Columbine: the Goths are blamed for everything). By the time the Genoese ruled Corsica, an average of 900 vendetta murders occurred annually—pretty astonishing when the total population hovered around 120,000 (the homicide rate of Manhattan is only a third of this). The member of one family was done wrong by the member of another family, and revenge had to be exacted through an almost ritualized stabbing. And there was that body on the floor, and mama pissed off and ululating for revenge: go, my second son, and set this wrongdoing right by avenging your older brother. You can almost see it as a scene in a minor opera by Massenet: commanding posture, the black-decked diva, the puzzling supertitles—what’s her problem? And back and forth it would go: payback’s a bitch.

Pascal Paoli tried to curb the vendetta death rate by promising to execute the executioners and leveling the family house and placing a “pillar of national disgrace” upon the rubble. Using the shame of “disgrace” was a fighting-fire-with-fire tactic, for a family member was expected, in a vendetta, to commit a murder in order to keep family honor. Usually, vendettas rose up over the honor of women, who, if seduced or raped or carried off and wed by the member of another family, needed to regain their dignity. Lesser things could start the bloodshed, however. Just a walk along the river with a pretty lady without her father’s permission could begin the cycle of vendetta.
And there are even more petty causes that would be hilarious if they were not so tragic: the Paolis and the Sanguinettis murdered thirty-six family members because of a chestnut tree. In Castagniccia (the word means Chestnut Town—more than coincidence?), a rooster was stolen, causing fourteen deaths. And one of the longest lasting feuds in the Extrem Sud region began because somebody didn’t tie up his donkey.

Is the vendetta a culturally specific tradition that needs to continue simply because it is culturally specific? I don’t want to trot out high school anthropology questions about whether a culture is destroying itself with its own rich traditions (African tribespeople cutting the clitoris, not allowing women to attend school in Muslim nations, the Amish eschewing zippers), but am I not allowed to express a value judgment on murder, on self-destruction? Then if not on a specific culture, then on this: a bizarre lack of imagination. Could not the Aztecs, in their incessant use of ritualized blood sacrifice, come up with a less actual, more symbolic, imagined sacrificial rite? Couldn’t the Corsican feuding families simply sit down at the table and work it out? “I’m sorry my donkey shat in your flower bed. Please accept this lovely shovel as a peace offering.”

Perhaps it is those with wild imaginations that are to blame, however. Apparently, when Dumas wrote The Corsican Brothers and The Vendetta and de Maupassant wrote “A Corsican Bandit” and Mérimée told the story of Colomba, stories that romanticize the vendetta and add all sorts of imaginative dimension that might not have been there, the Corsicans themselves read these works and took them to heart: this is our tradition, this is what we look like. Actual vendetta violence modeled itself on the art that embellished it. The actual vendetta got a shot in the arm from the metaphorical vendetta.

At least some suffering breeds a bit of beauty, and out of the violence of vendetta grew all sorts of art—the shiny, pretty knives in the souvenir shop, the rich literary tradition, and above all, for me, the
music. There is on Corsica a music that is so specific and beautiful that it may be the strongest argument for “Francesi Fora!” graffiti. It has grown, oddly enough, out of all the violence Corsica has endured, from the waves of marauding invaders who brought with them the many layers of cultural tradition, and this, the vendetta. When a man had been stabbed by a pretty stiletto, his bloody shirt was nailed to the family house, and the house’s windows were boarded up, a symbolic gesture grown out of rather realistic siege sensibility. Then there would be a funeral, and the women of the family would begin their song, called the voceru. They’d gather around the body, and wail and scratch their own faces and tear out their hair and still have the presence of mind to improvise four- and six-line verses that were meant to lament the dead (Dorothy Carrington writes of hearing such a song: “O my tufted cypress! My muscat grape! My sugared cake! My good and sweet mana” . . . “You were my column! You were my support! You were my grandeur! You were my brother! My oriental pearl! My finest treasure!”) and anger up the blood of the menfolk (Carrington, again, records a voceru execrating a priest, related to a murderer, refused to ring the church bell for the dead: “May I see in a basket / The entrails of the priest! / May I tear them with my teeth / And rub them with my hands. / In the house of the priest / One hears the Devil! / Infamous priest, excommunicated! / Dog, eater of the sacraments! / May you die in anguish! / In spasms and in torments!”). Nobody messes with my tufted cypress.

How could a man resist with that sort of hectoring going on in a boarded-up household? Well, any man who did resist was a coward, called a ribeccu, related to rimbeccu, the taunt that commands revenge: “Do it, you big sissy.” And those who did not take on the responsibility of revenge were cast out and usually had to leave Corsica. Those who did follow through, thereby becoming outlaws under law, were considered local heroes, the bandit d’honneur, Honorable Bandit, and cared for by the family until death.
These days, officially, of course, the vendetta is illegal. The last official vendetta ended near Ajaccio in the 1950s. In certain ways, it finds its outlets in the assassinations of politicos cozying up to the French government and is fueled by nationalism. Political terrorists enjoy a version of the heroic bandit d’honneur reputation.

And the voceru? Primarily sung by women, it has been adapted to the all-male a capella *polyphonie* tradition and become a vehicle for nationalism, as well, and the songs address Corsican independence. Much of it, as late as the early 1980s, was considered incendiary and dangerous. Musical groups like I Muvrini and Cantu u Populu Corsu and A Filetta made music that was illegal.

I must rephrase my wonder—how is it that beautiful things come out of ugly things? There is Dante again, betraying his own personal hatred, his own voceru, until it turned into lyric in *The Inferno*. Picasso’s *Guernica* transforming genocide, if not redeeming it. What art, after all, isn’t begotten of pain? Could something beautiful come out of all the terrorism, all our military maneuvers? And who will do the transforming?

Because I have been deep in myself while staring at exhibits behind smudgy glass, exhibits describing how Cap Corse is made, that rather addictive aperitif, or how to cure boar meat, Petra grows concerned because I have been unnaturally silent. And so I let loose that string of questions bottled up in me, and now she is the silent one, perhaps trying to translate the complexities, or perhaps pondering: who are rhetorical questions for? Me? Her? You? You, who got smack to the middle of this book thinking you were taking an armchair vacation, just as Petra thought she was taking a nice island resort vacation, and here you are, stuck, up to your neck in a lot of annoying dense prose? (That question was for you, by the way.)

As an American, a part-time Yankee, it occurs to me that I am the most irresponsible when I am merely a voyeur on the world’s troubles—disguising myself as a Canadian, and simply recording
what I see. I am thinking all of this as I walk around in Corte, and I realize that to be a witness, to record and describe all types of inequality and injustice in the world, one has to be culpable in the business, to get a little scratched up. To answer to my own nation’s bad deeds, but also, to suffer from them, as well. I am resolved, right there in the museum: if anybody else asks along the way, I am an American. The cock won’t crow again.

Even though we are taking a break from the GR20, we can’t help ourselves, for the museums and churches in Corte seem archival, stuffed, mummified. We arrange to drive down for a day to sample one of three other lovely walks in Corsica, the Mare e Mare trails. Had I to do it all over again, I would have planned to walk these as well as, if not instead of, the GR20. They are the Tra Mare e Monti (a ten-day trek that dances around the north part of the GR20) and the Mare a Mare Nord (a cross of the island from east to west with more spectacular mountains and a few less people to dodge). We take our day to sample the Mare a Mare Sud, known for its views of the villages and a curious prehistoric place called Cucuruzzu.

The sun shines on the harvest cork trees so that they are a deep, scabrous red, as if the trees had been flayed, painfully. They had been flayed, actually, but they also seem to thrive on this harvesting of their own bark, for when their barks are not stripped from their trunks, they seem to erupt like bad skin. We have a rental car for the day and drive on the twisting narrow roads behind trucks full of long troughs of cork oak, and these pieces, like overstacked dugout canoes, don’t seem well tethered to the truck, and we worry that we might be buried alive in the stuff. Pleasure, or one of its heavier storage units, will definitely be the end of me.

We park our car in a village called Levie and feel we have the energy to do a complete loop, which starts out in an auspicious manner,
when a sweet woman, whose rather fortified house resides along the road, fills our pockets full of walnuts. This would never happen on the GR20. The crowds that pass by that way are much like the tourist crowds we pit ourselves against in Corte. Here, things are quiet, and it may be the first time we actually experience Corsica as the way it is most true to itself.

After an easy shaded walk we reach Cucuruzzu, the Neolithic ruins of a village. There is a more famous one, considered a must-see in all the guidebooks, closer to the sea, called Filitosa, but this smaller site, less built up and more available for exploration and touch, suits me better.

I have explored in the past some of these mysterious lost civilizations like the people of the Nuraghi on Sardegna, ancient people with very sophisticated ideas about living well and worshiping well and eating well. There is no evidence of dunderheaded blood sacrifices or offerings to fertility gods, just good clean living, tens of thousands of years ago. Except, oops!, we forgot to develop a written language! Stupid Sardinian Bronze Age people.

Here on Corsica, on top of the village, a couple of medieval civilizations built themselves, perhaps in emulation. There are strange menhirs showing prehistoric warriors and ten-ton stones that have been moved around. Layers of pure civilization, all gone. We have little headsets with a narrative of our walk through the place, and that isolates both Petra and me from ourselves. We feel, separately, alone.

It puts us in quite a mood. Some deep connection to Bronze Age people and even the subsequent settlers who built their towns on top of the ruins, layers and layers of town—like Count Bianca in the twelfth century. Those old hoary holm oaks and cork oaks seemed suddenly young to us. The people who built here had no dream, no doubt, of the forests and civilizations that would come and go before we stand here with our multilingual headphones. These were the
cavemen Petra and I have been bragging to. They do not seem to care one bit.

There is that wind of lonesomeness blowing through the site, even on a sunny day, that also blows through the Ozymandias poem. It is humbling, unselfing, end-of-summer, sad: a blow to the ego: you’ll be as dead and inscrutable in far less time. If nature is the transforming artist, more than a voyeur, more of an involved witness, then this is its artwork—pilings of stone, yes, but evidence of people being able to live together, their own egos not important at all.

Petra and I snap out of it fairly easily, however, when she decides to take hairpin turns back home quite recklessly, and I reward her with melodramatic screams. We dine that evening on the Corsican charcuterie and wild boar, sangliere they call that beast, cooked in a variety of ways, so that I enjoy a terrine de Sangliere, a Sangliere stew, and sangliere “a la Corse”; Petra has mussels and a trout aioli. Good food fuels the ego, and I’m a deluded Ozymandias once more. The stew is cooked down to such a pitch that no spoon is needed. We share a great bottle of wine of the tar and roses sort—so thick I can almost feel the benzene molecules roll over my tongue like graphite. The boar is fine, not gamey at all—game does not taste gamey in Corsica, I suppose, because there is something of a blur, as always, between the tame and the wild here on the island. Corsica may be the world’s largest free-range ranch. And the wildness is reinforced when every cut of meat is cooked in herbs maquis. To cool the appetite, we have a thick dessert fiadone made of flan and chestnuts. And a second bottle of wine, one with even rougher, hairier shoulders.

The surprise of the dinner: Petra orders the cheese plate featuring brocciu, the aged smelly thing from ewes, and a fresh camembert thing. Our clever waiter, who whiles away summers waiting tables
and lives for the winters in order to snowboard (I see him arriving at one of the dilapidated ski resorts on the GR20 and finding himself terribly disappointed), as a courtesy, gives us a gift of the compote of figs and local fruit with the cheeses. Everything, the cheese, the cabernet franc-style red wine from down south, becomes jammy in our mouths.

There is an embarrassing moment when I wish our waiter a Bonne Anniversaire, to which he says, “What?” and then, “Oh, I thought you were speaking to me in English.” Basically, I say, I am. Meanwhile, on the steps of the church on the piazza, two guys play guitars of certain amped varieties while sitting on said amps. They have us singing to “Those were the days my friend / I thought they’d never end” and then one of the musicians comes up behind his buddy and at close physical proximity, the two play, with bravado, the same guitar.

This would be enough; however, as we stroll along the steps to get air and relax, we hear traditional Corsican folk music. I think it is a recording, but then, I decide, with a beer for a nightcap, a recording will be enough. I want to introduce Petra to Corsican polyphonie, this curious tradition of all-male a capella singing that I’d collected recordings of before the trip.

We slip into the bar. To our amazement, we find a live, five-person group that, for about three or four hours, we have, essentially, all to ourselves, a private concert. Here at the center of the island, and journey, and this book, I am having the best time I will have—I don’t care if my questions troubled you, or Petra, or even me.

How do I explain this Corsican singing stuff? “Trying to write about music is like dancing about architecture,” Frank Zappa said. There is, in polyphonie, the sound of sheets, layers of voice, necessary layers that keep the wind off you—you think you have enough blankets piled snugly over you on a cold evening, and an arctic breeze blasts, and then another thick wool blanket gets thrown on
you even before you shiver or realize you need it. And yet you feel completely vulnerable, open to some new truth you’ve never even thought of before. Corsican singing covers you up and strips you down, all at once.

Just two weeks before, I felt embarrassed and a failure for not being able to describe to a friend the spectacle of the peaks of the Grand Tetons, from which I had just returned (it was a busy summer of walking). My friend had said, “I guess you had to be there.” Nevertheless, like the lunky Dutch guy at the next table who tried to tell and then explain a rudimentary and not very funny blonde joke to our snowboarding waiter, I will attempt to describe polyphonie, without your having been there, with metaphor, first, and then rhetoric.

Metaphor: there is a minor episode in the biblical book of Numbers not much discussed in church but relegated to illustrated moments for children’s books found in dentist office waiting rooms (a perfect place for corrective religious instruction). In and around Moab, a man named Balaam was a great public speaker (he whom he blessed got blessed; he whom he cursed got cursed). He had a lot of influence. The Israelites showed up in Moab, and King Balak was a little worried that they’d party too much in his back yard. He asked Balaam—for a hefty fee, of course—to shout some curses about the God of the Israelites. Balaam seems to have been perfectly happy doing it, and probably spent that pay-for-pray curse purse several times over in his head. Imagine him standing out there on the top of Peor, which overlooks the desert, and doing his best to belt out defamations of divine character.

But what should come out of his mouth? Praise! Praise, loud and clear. I see it as one of those variety show mime stunts; you blow on a trumpet and out comes duck call. Instead of “God is a vengeful lazy phony,” from his mouth, against his intention, came, “God is great, God is good, God we thank you for our food,” and such and
such (actually, to be accurate, there were some lines about eating up the nations, but the food image is there). Needless to say, Balaam had to give the king his money back.

Now, I must nudge the metaphor along: imagine an unkempt (and by unkempt, for the image of it, anyway, I mean unshaven) shepherd climbing out of his bergerie and looking to yawn, when out comes a musical note, direct, resonant, scaring the sheep. The note bounces off the lichen-covered mountain walls a hundred times. Four other shepherds answer in kind.

Yikes. More rhetoric, now, beginning with questions: Does the human voice rise to imitate musical instruments, or do instruments we make try to do the same for voice? On my grandmother’s Wurlitzer “Funmaker” organ, where she entertained me with upbeat renditions of “Sentimental Journey” and “Theme from Doctor Zhivago,” she always chose to open up the Vox Humana stop, reedier, more nasal than we like to think the human voice sounds.

But maybe both instrument and voice are handmaids to the music of nature, try to order its many sounds, orchestrate them. Imagine a half dozen or so men, then, crowded together—outdoors, it always must be imagined, at least, outdoors—and one of them, like a mountain beast—always a mountain beast, a goat, a ram, a sheep, a muvra—bleats out a note, Balaam’s intended insulting roar, and what comes out is something from deeper below the man’s feet, out of caverns or air, growing things, birth, death. When the bleat becomes a word, when the song’s subject reveals itself (the subject always last to be noticed, but noticed, like the last deep voice from the three-part harmony that joins in last, to anchor, to secure us to the world before we fall off this cliff that everywhere suddenly is) it is of love, or dying of it, or revenge because it went wrong because, well, this is Corsica.

The main bleat clears the top of that last peak over yonder and takes the top of your head off along the way, without your knowing
it, and after his direct attack, he has, like the flying wedge formation in a football play, given space for the other men in the group to join in, fill in, and vibrate. They vibrate, their voices, the notes nearly match and then tremble up and then down around themselves, modulate, ululate, and you can hear every culture that ever put the moves on Corsica, friend and foe—Islamic calls to worship, Tuscan calls to war, Aragonese calls to drink, stuff that has always been out there in the air—and these modulations the men do are actually bringing that out of the sky like radio frequencies on a ham radio set. You feel capable of singing it yourself (but please don’t: leave it to the locals), on some level, I think, and that’s its attraction, for it seems it has always been your own tradition, although it is specifically Corsican. It’s the song you want to sing when you’ve caught your finger in the car door, or hit your head on a low portal, or eaten too much at Thanksgiving, or accidentally insulted the host. So much for rhetoric; I’ve lapsed into metaphor once again.

There’s more science and history to it all than that, of course. I ought, as a responsible travelologist, to give you the true history of Corsican music with all its categories and theories: the polyphonies are just one type and developed from that voceru, that cri di coeur of a black-clad woman. There is, too, the chiama e rispondi, when two shepherds sing sixteen-syllable lines back and forth from one cliff to another in the mountains, or, as it easily evolved, antiphony, calling back and forth from one wing of an organ loft to another in a church.

I forget myself in the presence of such music. That sounds disingenuous, since I’ve written it, but it’s true: there were half-moon marks in the palms of my hands from clutching my own fists in intent distraction. To describe the sound is to describe the Mediterranean, for which there is no crayon color, even in the box with the jumbo assortment.

When I listen to these guys, I can hardly keep myself from tearing up (I slip into the grandiose again, but it’s not crying, no—it’s
weeping), and I begin to blow money: on beer, for one, for Petra, for the band. Then I pay for a request: “A Tribbiera,” which is a gorgeous wailing traditional tune that’s sung to an ox as it walks in a tethered circle threshing grain in its wake. The group whips it off (all night they leaf through a songbook as if they know the tunes but need to look at the words, a first-time run-through).

Then I see that they have a CD for sale, and then I buy it, and then I run around grinning, after the weeping, and like a dork, I have them all autograph it. Then I think, this music is different than anything and—while the nationalistic tendency seems simpatico enough already, given the discrete land, the specific language (however in debt to the Genoese), the cultural tradition—it is this music that nudges me fully behind the rabble-rousing impulse. But to be clear, it’s not a hardcore patriotism I feel, not a clenching of my jaw, but a relaxing: a softness comes, and I know it’s soft—and still.

But they’re just a bunch of guys wearing jeans and various styles of black shirts. They’d look like a bowling team if they lived in the States, if that’s where they were. In this bar they look like bowlers in bad marriages, avoiding the trip home. I remember, oddly, those package-deal gymnasium assemblies arranged in our high school that were required for attendance: a juggler, a comedian, and, oh no! I’m so worried for that stupid band from Corsica! But everybody loved them—so different and beautiful and, oh yes, masculine all at once. They are masculine, though again there’s that necessity to sing in close proximity, touch each other, even press cheeks together or put one’s arm around another guy. A tenderness. Any minute now, and they’re going to start braiding each other’s hair. And yet you have to cover your own ear to plug the other guy’s sound, to keep your even pitch perfect and pure. That’s ironic.

And then, around one in the morning, two rich French twits walk into our private concert with three high-end prostitutes in ridiculous Eurotrash shorts. They prance and grope, but the band
holds its own, although I see them look, perhaps even enviously, toward the twits and twats, feeling that softness (of lust, this time) in themselves, wishing they could have three hot babes any time they wanted. The Bad Element claps wildly after each song, apparently not hearing in nearly every politically charged verse some version of “Francesi Fora!”: Give us your money, give us your adulation, give us a beer, and then go the hell away.

They are the bad guys to me, the outsiders, the prostitutes and their johns, and heroes to the band, I guess; to the band, I am the dork, running around grinning and weeping and gathering autographs; weeping, yes, weeping. And the prostitutes make it easy to want to go home, continue our journey across the GR20. Softness begets toughness.

We are nearly ready to go back to our hotel, our expensive beers are gone. Behind the band, there is a door hung in space, purposeless, even hazardous. I’ve been watching the guitarist on the far left, his pure eyes, the expensive beers, and then—and then a stupid little thing happens. A bit of lavender from my sangliere a la Corse came loose from between my teeth. The maquis mixes in with the Pietra beer, the pure voices, and I have this overwhelming sense of being alone with the band (still not fully ruined by the whores)—even the insiders, they themselves couldn’t know my pleasure. It is all mine.

Immediately, I want to ruin the moment by saving it. Where’s the CD, I want to know, and then think: Let it go! I am so soft to want to shut it down, lock it up, own it. “Stupid Canadian boy,” Petra says, handing me a bar napkin: for God’s sake, pull yourself together.

“Stupid American boy,” I correct her, and blow.

She hands me another bar napkin, and I murmur some complaint about their feckless size, but she consoles us both: “Cavemen never got to blow their noses in a bar napkin.”

The music, the beer, the joke, they all make me even softer, and each time you read this, I’m as soft as that snake that’s lost its skin. I
lose it over and over, you, here, watching me now, me, there, shedding it then. It works; I am a viable responsible witness—as long as I write about it well enough and you are willing to take on the burden of believing me.

**Vizzavona to E’Capannelle**

That deer that ran away from me near the beginning of the étape was not a deer at all, but the ass-end of a moufflon, or “Muvra,” one of the “muivrini,” as they call these mountain rams and the Corsican band that bleats like them. It was probably as close as I ought get to one, too. And when I stop for a little water and a rest and to look into my guidebook, it turns out I was lucky to have seen it at all.

Sheep dot the hill like throw pillows. The throw-pillow sheep. And they seem cheapened by their rare cousin, whom I have spooked.

Perhaps it was not such a good idea to give ourselves a couple of days of clean linen and fine dining, only to send ourselves back into the wilds. The calluses that take so long to build up on my hands and feet go away within hours, it seems, and setting out this morning from the chalet, I felt soft and, compared to the hikers who had simply stayed on the trail, well-groomed. Even my Wringing Muscles have gone slack in that little time, the ones in the upper wrist that get sore from wringing out clothes after washing them by hand and hoping against hope that they will be dry enough to wear the next morning on the trail.

And the first place we stop is not very inspiring: yet another rusty winter ski resort gone belly-up. If we had not arrived on the train so late in the morning, we probably would have walked farther to the Bocca di Verdi, which we would only be able to find out the next day would have been a perfect place to pitch a tent. As it was, we did not feel like renting another expensive hotel room, and found a semi-illegal corner of the hotel grounds and tried not to look at the
nightmare of a ski lift that will take a rider only as far as the Land of Lockjaw.

Sunlight does not so much shine as it does sparkle on a perfect olive tree in front of our tent, and we have decided to “eat in.” Petra makes more of the noodles, and I cut pieces of the massive lonzu and the brocciu, too, to go with a day-old baguette. We splurge on another of those paper-stoppered bottles of wine from the gardien, which I find out really comes out of a box and probably costs a buck, even though they charge ten. We eat all this on top of my too-big red poncho, so it’s like a picnic. The weather is fine outdoors, but we don’t want to be bothered by the riffraff, or that view.

Petra is pleased, for a glass or two of any kind of wine makes her the best dining companion. It’s like winding up a tin toy. My companion, my delight. “My cousin is getting married today somewhere in Dusseldorf,” she tells me.

“Really? Are you close? Is he going to be disappointed?”

“Well, he’s not really a cousin, but we grew up with them, and our parents knew their parents because my grandfather was rescued by their grandparents during the war.” I’m always a little tense around these sorts of stories, because what we’re talking here is Nazis. Anybody in “the war” from Germany would have been. What are you going to do? Some of them really were foot soldiers, some actually suffered. Patriotism: the easiest emotion. Thinking around it, whether the beholder or the beholden, takes some work.

Petra goes on to say that she played house, she and this cousin, and he was the first boy she ever “touched.”

“I used to play house in kindergarten,” I tell her, “and I always wanted to play the father, I don’t know why. I decided that the thing you said when you were the father was, ‘You people are giving me an ulcer.’”

This leads to Petra’s discussion of what she calls the “psychodramas” that she participated in during college, including one about the
Nativity in which her role was to say, “No room at the inn!” In all the stories, Petra wanted to play the bad guy.

“Me too!” I say. “Why do you think this is?”

My shoulders are sore from having the backpack on again after three days without. Putting it on that morning, I think I got a pretty good idea what it was like to be a horse, or any beast of burden, and have a saddle strapped onto me: the editor of *Stubborn Pack Mule Monthly*. Why are we doing this? Getting back on the dusty trail to the lonesome Laricios when there is wine and music at the spa down below? Perhaps, I suggest to Petra, it’s all about the delay of gratification, the withholding of pleasure. “Or entering pleasure through the side door.”

“Through the side door?” She is checking her translation; is it an idiomatic expression she has forgotten?

“Like the church in Corte—the Eglise de l’Annonciation. We couldn’t walk through the front door and walk right down the aisle. It was locked. We had to go to the side door to be let in. We were only allowed to enjoy the nice things inside if we came to it from the side.”

“What nice things?” Petra wants to know. We were both a little horrified, it’s true, by a St. Theophilus in that church, a statue made of wax. He’d been melting for a little while. And he was pretty much the main attraction.

But I still like my theory. I tend to eat inward from the edges of a plate of food, especially if it is haute cuisine and complex, approaching a thing that’s a grand marriage of many parts by sampling each of the parts first. Climb the mountain to get the vista, descend the mountain to get some sleep.

Even out here, walking along to the tune of that different drummer, I feel out of step even with my fellow out-of-steppers—there are evenings when I feel the need to drop into a coma when everybody around me seems to have breezed into camp effortlessly. And
on this night: vice versa—I am full of energy and jokes, and everybody else seems to have had life sucked from them by the sun and wind. Petra has gone into the gîte to talk to somebody in German for a change. I share the night with Auden—my own game of hackey sack. Poetry books are perfect for hiking: compact, plenty to unpack, designed the way high tech guys design my tent and sleeping bag; they are durable and reusable, although this word “use” is a charged, muddy word, for as my hackey-sack buddy Auden says, “poetry makes nothing happen: it survives / In the valley of its making where executives / Would never want to tamper.”

I take a walk with my weak penlight down tomorrow’s trail a bit, because, of all things, I’m having a spell of my agoraphobia. They’ve built a massive bonfire in front of the gîte, a small luxury usually forbidden with so much flammable maquis. I find a flat stone and sprawl upon it, so that I can watch the stars; the spill of the Milky Way wheels above me. If I place myself just right, the only thing I can see is stars. Toby, a writer friend who has spent a life fishing for crabs and other sea beasts in Alaskan waters, wrote once about a rare occurrence when the boat he was in, far out on the sea, encountered a calm under a cloudless night sky, and he had the strange sensation of floating in space, the little craft surrounded by billions of stars above and below. It only took the slightest ripple in the water to end the illusion, but oh, what an illusion that must have been.

I’m perfectly content marveling at the surfeit of stars I get up here, free of city lights and smoke—minor constellations reveal themselves here, constellations I could only memorize before today, rather than observe, for my astronomy merit badge in Scouts. It’s September and the summer constellations are slowly giving themselves over to the winter sky, so I get a bit from both worlds—Taurus and Cassiopeia, and Scorpio and even Orion’s neck—and there are the made-up constellations from countless camping trips with as many marvelous goof-off friends: The Great Dixie Cup; the Peeved
Elephant; L 7 Major and L 7 Minor, those patron gods of losers past and present. Satellites, those must be, blinking, streaking high and with purpose, and I marvel at the cataract glaze of Milky Way once again, a treasure trail itself that seems to rise from the smoke and sparks of the gîte’s bonfire just up the trail I’ve descended.

I stand up among the familiar and unfamiliar stars and backtrack upward, and have my own strange sensation of ascending into heaven, and lo!, how, just at the top of the hill, the Big Dipper shows itself, and I have to laugh at its simple familiarity—a bit of the domestic beamed down to me here, oddly the oldest familiar thing to most of humanity after, perhaps, prostitution and religious intolerance—and I feel at home not only geographically but in time, knowing that its big scoop is twinkling down on Petra in the gîte, Michael in Chicago, on Jeff alive again in San Francisco, Boy Scout Brian at Camp Teetonkah, with just two merit badges to go before earning his rank of “Star,” and cavemen.

E’Capanelle to Usciolu

I have a bruise on my left hip, and I don’t know how I came to get it. Banging all around I suppose, tearing the skin off every digit against stone and stick. Hiking is like a binge-drinking binge, another sort of lost weekend, a blackout.

We have arrived at the refuge Usciolu, and it is a ferociously cheerful place. The gardien loves his job. He has souvenirs, and a postmark he will stamp on any postcards you may have purchased who knows where, and he will run them into the next village on his energetic burros if you give them to him. He’s got a solar powered CD player, and he blasts from the veranda traditional Corsican polyphonie. He has a well-stocked larder and can even make salads. He has enthusiasm and jokes galore and lots of ideas for day hike excursions. He has enough energy to sprint the GR20, damn his hide.
What he doesn’t have is room. The gîte is perched on the side of a hill and so there are very few places for all of us to pitch our tents. Petra and I are midlist hikers and we arrive at the étape a bit after the supertrekkers have come in and claimed the choice bunks in the bunkhouse and the best campsites for the tents. We always manage to get something—often something better, because we pitch farther away from the facilities, which some think inconvenient, but listening to tired campers stumble over one’s guy lines all night while trying to make it to the outhouse doesn’t seem a hallmark of convenience. We often find ourselves a little off to the side, where it is more quiet and sometimes more picturesque.

But here at Usciolu, there aren’t any spaces left for us, and again all I can think of are those poor suckers that always come after us, the ones even slower and usually much more exhausted. Petra and I search and search and have to come up with a makeshift place between a couple of rocks, where we can barely hear the canned polyphonie.

Along the last leg of the walk, too, we were chased by black biting flies that seem to have been bred from years of donkeys walking along here, the preferred meat of blackfly. So much of the GR20 is made up of very ancient pathways made by burros and goats and shepherds leading their sheep to the huts we pass along the way, called pastori. Very nymphs-and-shepherds, except for the part about the flies. And the dung. And the trails that lead off into the bushes and get you lost.

This is the end of a weekend, although weekends don’t mean much when you’re deep into a trail. But both Petra and I traditionally call home to our parents, because it’s a Sunday, when the rates are cheap, though that, too, doesn’t mean much in the age of the cell phone. Petra grabs The Most Powerful Cell Phone in the World, and she calls from our mountainside as if she were using a payphone downtown. “Something cavemen never experienced,” she, like my
father, points out the obvious, as she waits for somebody to pick up somewhere in Bavaria. We were all such cavemen not fifteen years ago. Everybody is somebody else’s caveman.

She ended up talking with her five-year-old nephew at length, told him about the lammergeier and, if I can guess through the German, something about sports-walking.

Afterwards, she explains about her nephew who lives with Petra’s frumpy sister in Dusseldorf, not nearly as adventurous as her aunt. He wants to go with Petra, and this causes tension between the sisters. He is all kinetic energy, like today’s gardien. He never goes swimming, or at least he does not just go swimming, but sports-swimming.

“‘Sports’ is German for ‘extreme,’” I tell her.

“What?”

“You have sports-swimming, sports-running, sports-footballing. We say ‘extreme.’ Extreme football. Extreme running. Extreme team luge.”

“What is extreme luge?” Petra wants to know.

“We use one of the team members as sled runners in extreme team luge.”

“Ooohhh,” Petra understands. “You are talking about sports-luge!”

Her nephew knows that we are walking across Corsica, and he calls it sports-walking. He is correct. I am sports-writing now. By evening, Petra has fallen in love with the concept of “extreme.” She wants an “extreme” cappuccino, made with the gardien’s blood. We discuss her nephew’s birthday, when we can send him an extreme piñata, filled with molten cheese. What would be on the extreme Damenkarte, we wonder.

“Do you want to have children?” she suddenly asks.

“Oh, no. I am a child,” I tell her. I pick up her cell phone, because it’s my turn to call home. “How about you? Do you want to have children?”

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I call back home, too, which is six hours behind us. The news is under water. My mother tells me that my niece was visiting, and she had found a turtle. Jamie, a quiet foggy cat of a girl, gets on the line. Our relationship is strained; whenever we’re together for holidays or trips back to Michigan, I usually interview her, and she responds with simple yes-or-no answers. I keep thinking I’ll try to rephrase my questions, but here on the GR2O, I fall back on old habits. “You’ve got a turtle?” I try.

“Yeah,” she says—and this is the most loquacious she has ever been with me, perhaps precisely because I am on the other side of the world—“but one of its eyes was gone when I got it.” I don’t know what that really means, “gone.” Swollen shut? Rotted out?

“And the other one is gone now,” she adds. “Now it doesn’t move.”

My mother takes the phone back. “We’re going to see if we can’t put it out of its misery,” she tells me. Such brutality, so far away. I can’t help the turtle. Jamie’s little brother, my own sports-nephew, got on the line, too. “How is the turtle,” I asked him, because maybe a second opinion will put my mind at ease.

“Good!” he says, “I’m killing flies for his food. How many flies do you think he can eat?”

Boys and their “mosts.” It must be some version of competition, to pit ideas against each other in contests, objects that would never meet in any sort of arena. There must always be a victor, must always be one thing superior, one thing ordinary. Certainly, I am not fond of the possibility of being ordinary. It takes some getting used to. I recall here the feeling I had when we descended from Petra Piana in the cloudburst, how wet and slow and ill-prepared we were, and all I could think of was the people still at the previous campsite, taking down their tents in the rain; I had to be superior, they had to be ordinary.

It’s an international phenomenon, this larval macho stage. I can usually guess what people are asking me from context in a foreign language I don’t know; it’s all the same stuff: Where’s the bathroom?
Do you have any more of that wine? Can I borrow your knife? Are you using this umbrella? Have you seen a little dead British boy? and so forth. But boys, they ask things like, “How high is that mountain?” “Who ate the most hot dogs in one sitting?” “How many liters of fuel does this farm implement take?” “Who would win in a fight between Heidi and Godzilla?” out of the blue, for no reason, no context in sight.

In the gîte in Usciolu, I encounter the first American I’ve seen so far. “How many days have you been walking?” He is full of the same numbers and conquests. After my resolve to come out of the closet as an American, without fear, I say hello to him at the water pump and he introduces himself as “Pete, from Philadelphia.” He is eager to let out all the stuff he has been storing up inside himself, being alone with his brain for days and days. He tells me about all the places he has hiked and I am, indeed, impressed. But he is restless and unfulfilled. While Petra and I have dreamed of Tibet and Zanzibar and Crete, this Pete wants to go to the top of Everest and the bottom of the Marianas Trench, the most highest and the most lowest. “Then you can relax,” he tells me. “You,” I remark: you, meaning, all of us; “you”: that should be your goal—highest and lowest. Then we can all relax.

Pete uses all sorts of shifts in point of view. He’s very much a storyteller that way. “Then you can relax,” is, of course, a sort of camouflaged “I,” so that he doesn’t have to show any feelings at all—not even the feeling of not being relaxed, which apparently he isn’t, and won’t be, until he gets down there in the trench and up there at the top of Everest. On the other hand, when he offers to show me his cooking equipment because it has proven to be a wonder in lightweight, space-saving technology as well as a maker of a mean can of soup, he proves his authority on the subject by switching over to the third person “they”: “Because Pete Knows Food,” he says, the way “Bo Knows Basketball.” It’s a puffed up chest-beating stance,
warning the listener of that Hulk-like alter ego just waiting under the skin that you, brother, don’t wanna mess with. Not on the subject of cooking, no way. It seems to be some version of the royal “we” as well, although it doesn’t seem nearly as kingly but more like a dog, barking when it is afraid or on the defensive, a protective stance.

To tell the truth, I don’t often walk with this sort; they’re a new sort. And by a “new” sort, I mean, of course, a very old sort, the ones who wait on me at the outdoor store, who bide their time between extreme adventure sorties by playing their own game of hackey sack near the rack of quick-drying socks when I’m trying to select some, or discouraging hikers from buying soap because it’s bad to wash in the river, when I’m trying to buy soap (of course it is bad for the river; I don’t intend to wash myself or anything else in the river). They don’t seem to think anything I’m trying to buy in their store is the right thing (walking shoes instead of hiking boots, a rain poncho that fits over myself and my backpack, energy bars, rain pants that make the delightful “zvik-zwik” noise when I walk) and wherever it is that I’ve walked or plan to walk, it is not usually where they have been, so it doesn’t really exist.

And by the old sort, I mean the sort I used to hike with, years ago when I was zigzagging my way up to the top of Bridal Veil in Yosemite or to Surprise Lake in the Grand Tetons. It was all a big race for those boys, who chose their hikes not for the views but by the level of difficulty. They may think they’re sensitive nature boys, but they are just as macho as the next, shut down to the possibilities of anything other than what they know and are comfortable with.

But every once in a while, our paths still cross, and they are filled with a furious, brittle, haughty, and (dare I say it?) queeny (I do dare!) disdain. The last time this happened was during a walk up the side of Mount Snowden in Wales. I went there with my friends Michael and Marta and their young daughter Rafaela, my godchild. It’s a fairly easy day hike to the summit of Snowden, so we packed ourselves a
picnic lunch with sandwiches and champagne, and one of us carried Rafaela in one pack while another safeguarded the champagne. We were passed by a team of hutt-hutt-hutt hikers in cleated shoes. They wrapped themselves with ropes and clips for safety. We strapped a baby to ourselves, for safety. They beat us to the top, but there was still a table available for us in the pub at the top of the mountain. Come on, guys, there’s a pub at the top!

I can see them size me up here (and by sizing me up, I mean that their eyes started up at my face and sized down to my shoes, always it’s the shoes they can’t abide) on the GR20, some of them passing from the south to the north, and the first thing they do is ask me all those measurements: How much does your pack weigh? Is your sleeping bag going to keep you warm if it gets to be twenty below zero? What level sunblock are you using? Who ate the most hot dogs in one sitting?

Each morning, they break their camp before dawn, do not bother with coffee but replaced it with tiny packets of charmless caffeinated goo that have to be sucked out of a sealed pouch, and stomp by our tent while we sip tea and fold our drying clothes. They stand in disbelief, a few hours later, when we saunter into camp at the next étape, looking at us if to say, How did you find out my name is Rumpelstilskin?

There were those two in particular, inseparable as lovers, the French Roosters, and we lost them when we left the GR20 for a couple of days. Impossible as it would seem, they were replaced by two new Roosters, almost identical in build and carriage, although these two seem to hate, rather than love, each other. They are held together by a single shared guidebook, I think, and not much else. There is one other difference between the old Roosters and the new: these two are noisy. Squawking and crowing all the way down the piste. I don’t even have to get the meaning of their words when they speak to know the gist: boasting. They are alike in that they are both
suffering an odd version of male pattern baldness in which a bit of hair at the front stayed while the rest receded back and the monk’s tonsure took hold. They look as if they have large mustaches that have migrated to their foreheads, the sort that barbershop quartet singers have under their noses.

Compared to them, good old American Pete is not such a bad sort. But once he has told me all about the places he has walked and where it is he wants to walk in the future, once he has revealed to me his master plan to plow the Marianas Trench and scale the heights of Everest, then he can relax. And he does. And has nothing left to say to me for the rest of the GR20.

_Usciolu to Asinau_

Not that the touristic invaders from the coast haven’t had their own effect on the inland villages. The locals, in the villages we walk through, seem to be made up of big lunk-headed stony boys with Harley-Davidson T-shirts and aging women in stretch pants, who aren’t afraid to show a camel toe (one that seems meant to match their pointed shoes). They drink in the little bars while we tourists drink outside. There is this restlessness of people who live on islands, even when you can’t tell you’re on an island, that makes them seem like flies bouncing about in a bottle.

They watch us pass through with our packs and are puzzled that we would bother doing this, especially without a car, or at least a mule. And they are something for us to look at, too, for they are interchangeable from place to place, so that we sometimes wonder whether we have moved at all.

On this day our walking goes through the same wild changes of geography as those we experienced near Lake Nino. There are strange stone outcrops eroded by rain and wind and whatever other sorts of weather these mountains create, and then we enter the
moors, a jollier sort of moors than are found in England near the border of Scotland. They could be pozzines, if the land didn’t rise and fall so often, so repeatedly, and for some reason, I am cheered by being able to see the Gulf of Ajaccio, where I sailed in a week or so before.

From there we start to walk up, and while Petra doesn’t complain, my eye is always on her. We take many rest breaks and resolve not to be bothered by the way other hikers overtake us. Usually they die out on their own, anyway. Our reward for this steady work is another new spectacle, a crucifix planted on a dome at the summit, glacially laced boulders strewn about in a way that makes me search around in my mind to understand how the job was done geographically. And when we look on to the way we go farther, it is a prairie full of maquis, as thick and regular as the poppy field in The Wizard of Oz. And farther on than that: the Aiguilles de Bavella, and the Emerald City of aforesaid movie are a pretty good approximation of what those look like. Even with a backpack pulling at us the way it has for the previous four hours, we want to run to the Bavella range.

We have left the forests for a while, and so we’ll have no shade, and we won’t have any more of my favorite apparitions of the moist shady areas, those fire salamanders, slippery black fellows with flaming yellow spots.

“Why don’t you sing the fire salamander song?” Petra suggests, when I lament that we won’t be seeing fire salamanders much any more. This song, so it happens, is sung to the tune of “Yesterday,” by the Beatles, and its lyrics are rather subject to invention, much like the Corsica voceru. It has done little good drawing salamanders to us, either. By the end of the walk today, I have no energy to improvise lyrics, nor sing even “I know an old woman who swallowed a fly,” I am that exhausted. I ask Petra if she will set up the tent herself, and she pushes me over, and I let her, and rest in the dirt, because it’s nice to be horizontal, even though horizontal is on something of a
slant here. I get up, eventually, because all the blood starts to drain to my head.

The refuge at Asinau has nice views, but we have trouble pitching the tent on flat ground, not the first time this happened. This is what happens when you spend so much time perched on the slopes of mountains. Even when we thought we were level, I’d find myself in the morning bunched at the front end of the tent, having slid slowly over the night. My toes do this in my shoes on the downhills, another reason I dislike the downhills.

In the overused toilets of the Asinau refuge, I read a sign in my own language, a rare occurrence, and so written because the message is more important than all the other map directions, fire and storm warnings, and menus: “It pleased to walkers to leave the toilet clean. Thanks to understand.” You are more than welcome.

This is a fairly new refuge and only a couple of years before, walkers would have to take a detour for two hours down to the village of Zicavo, a lovely place we would visit in a car after all our journeys on the GR20 have ended, in order to restock with food and water. Now the gîte purposefully carries all the things we need and cooks us yet another omelette. Always with the omelettes. No, no, it’s okay—crack a couple of eggs for me. I am grateful.

While I set up the tent and Petra just watches (my punishment), Petra tells me about an old schoolteacher of hers who made this journey down the GR20 twenty years before, when there were no gardiens, no gîtes to support hikers. He had to drive through the island before he walked and buried for himself metal boxes full of food and other supplies, which he could unearth as he went back through on foot. “That’s a lot of work,” I told Petra. “I don’t think I would do it if I had to do that.”

“You Americans, you have no morals,” she said. “You are all like midwives.” Apparently, the midwife is an effective metaphor of the weakling in Teutonic countries. Staying up all night and helping a
woman in labor—that sounds like a lot of work, too. But secretly I wish there were places in the world like the GR20 twenty years ago. Every special place, every camino and chemin and trail, seems to have been fully discovered, picked over. Perhaps I will turn to caving next.

A foot journey, whether to a pilgrim site or anywhere, is a love affair, I suppose; I’d had my chance with this lover. In Corte I went to a quiet morning café before Petra got up. There were six hard-drinking Madrileños who asked me to pull up a chair with them: they were impressed with my Spanish, and I’m easily flattered, although I quickly volunteered that I didn’t quite understand the subjunctive. How is it going? they asked, and I told them we had been resting from the GR20 and that I was running out of trails in the world and I would soon return to walk their own road to Santiago a second time. One of the men of the group took a moment from his avuncular, alcoholic happiness to say with great seriousness, “Segundos partes nunca fueron buenas,” second times never have gone well. Or Einstein said it another way: the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results.