Sheep, people dogs

Bernard: Avec des brebis, les enfants, ça les intéresse toujours parce que c'est de plus petite taille et ça ne présente pas un danger.

Hannah Sassoon: This is Bernard, a sheep farmer. He’s saying that his grandkids love to be around the sheep, because they aren’t dangerous, they’re small. The grandkids are walking among the sheep, and he and I are bringing up the rear. The whole flock is pouring down toward the barn—thousands of little hooves, tapping over the rocks. We’re bringing them in for the night.

We are on the Larzac, a plateau in south-central France. The Larzac is sheep country. Sheep are indigenous, and people have lived with them here for five or six thousand years.

It’s a porous place. When it rains, it rains through the ground, water trickling quickly through layers of shells and fossils, through the land’s archive of itself, through time.

Bernard and his partner, Ginette, have been raising sheep here since the 1970s. They also raised four daughters, and the youngest one, Léa, who's my age, now runs the farm. Léa and I first met as penpals when we were teenagers. We wrote to each other almost every day, and the summer I was fifteen, I came and lived with the family.

Léa had strong arms and a face full of freckles. She taught me how to milk the sheep, and we helped Bernard stack hay for the winter. Ginette showed me the garden, and took me around to visit neighbors. I came back in winter to help with the lambs, during the few weeks when all seven hundred sheep give birth.

Once, that winter, Bernard had me hold down a sheep who was in labor while he eased a hand inside her and pulled out a stillborn lamb. Then without missing a beat, he sprinted across the barn. I stayed with the mother and put a hand on her back. She wouldn’t look at me. Bernard ran back to us a minute later with an orphan lamb in his arms. He scooped up the dead wet newborn, slathered it all over the living lamb to transfer the scent, and then pushed the orphan in front of the mother’s nose, a changeling.

It's been sixteen years since then. Léa now has two kids. We've kept in touch, loosely.

But the Larzac, the place, has stayed with me. I remember walking alone through its barren looking fields and finding, close to the ground, all kinds of stubborn wild plants, and then realizing that just under the dry grasses lay a field of bones.

Dry grass, wind

Sassoon: The land here is gray green and strewn with rocks. It's really dry, sparsely populated, and for the most part, devoid of trees. It's perfect for sheep farming. And it's also like this because of sheep farming. Over time, all the grazing and trampling and manuring and mowing and sowing seeds and burning shrubs have shaped the land. You can see it.

From the perspective of the state, a flat, dry, remote landscape like this is also extremely well suited for other things. Namely: testing weapons and training soldiers.

At the end of the 19th century, the French National Army showed up on the Larzac, claimed a chunk of it, and converted it into a military camp. The land they took didn't really belong to anyone anyway. It was a commons that connected three villages.

Birds, bells

Sassoon: In exchange for the land, the villagers were promised jobs and prestige. The camp opened for operations in 1902. In the early years of the camp, shepherds were still allowed inside with their flocks, so the sheep could graze. A warning bell would sound when they had to evacuate, before the explosions would start.

Ginette: Et là, au printemps, en entend, lorsqu'on on est dehors,

Sassoon: Even now, Ginette tells me, we can hear explosions in the springtime.

Ginette: Boum...boum... Le camp, c'est pas loin. À vol d'oiseau, je ne sais pas, trois kilomètres.

Sassoon: The camp isn't far from us, as the crow flies, maybe three kilometers.

Ginette: C'est pas loin.

Weapons in the distance, *road noise*

Sassoon: Bernard shows me around in the car. He and Ginette first moved to the plateau together in the ’70s.

Sassoon: Comment vous vous êtes connus?

Sassoon: I ask how they first met.

Bernard: Les hasards de la vie, et puis...

Sassoon: The coincidences of life. He’s being cagey.

Bernard: Non, on s'est connu dans un concert, un concert de rock,

Sassoon: They met at a rock concert—

Bernard: un concert avec Deep Purple.

Sassoon: —with Deep Purple.

Bernard: Voilà.

Sassoon: Tu te rappelles la première fois que tu l'as vue?

Sassoon: I ask if he remembers the very first moment he saw her.

Bernard: Oui bien sûr, oui, oui. Je trouvais qu'elle ressemblait à Petula Clark.

Sassoon: He thought she looked like the pop star Petula Clark.

Bernard: Non, non, oui.

Sassoon: When I ask Ginette, later, what she remembers of their meeting, whether it was, you know, love at first sight, a lightning strike

Ginette: (laughs)

Sassoon: C'est un coup de foudre ?

Ginette: Oui, je crois plus papa que moi, mais.

Sassoon: More for him than for me, but.

Before they moved to the Larzac, Bernard and Ginette were warned about the military camp. They knew it's inherently precarious to live next to a military zone.

But whatever pressure the camp created wasn't a major factor for them. They were both in love with the landscape.

Road noise

Sassoon: Through the window of the car, we can see beautiful rock formations, dolomitic outcrops, arches, carved shapes.

Bernard: C'est le fruit de l'érosion.

Sassoon: Bernard calls them the fruit of erosion.

Bernard: Tous ces rochers, il faut les imaginer des nuits de pleine lune.

Sassoon: He says you have to imagine them at night, under a full moon.

Bernard: Voilà.

Sassoon: We speed across the wide open surface of the Larzac. We can see for miles, but a strange thing keeps happening. The ground undulates enough that, as we drive, whole swaths of the plateau tuck and disappear from view, and others suddenly seem to spring open, as if the land were rearranging itself.

At the time that the military camp first opened, At the turn of the century, it was actually part of a trend. For a couple of decades, the National Army had been steadily acquiring pockets of rural land, and building training camps all across France. At the same time, France was invading more and more land overseas.

These things are linked. As the empire colonized more and more external territory, it fortified its military by claiming more and more internal territory. Two forms of occupation in lockstep.

In addition to the islands and coasts it already controlled, including Tahiti, New Caledonia, the Comoros, Djibouti, Senegal, Côte d'Ivoire, French Guiana, Guadeloupe, and Martinique, France seized Indochina, Madagascar, Tunisia, and

most of West and Central Africa. France started colonizing Algeria in 1830, but it was a slow process.

France was still seizing Algerian land by the time the Larzac camp opened in 1902.

I want to find out more about the military camp. We can't see it from the farm, because of how the ground tilts, but it's right there, just across the highway. Sometimes when we're eating lunch, army planes go roaring overhead.

When I ask the family about it, Ginette immediately phones a few friends.

Cell phone rings

Sassoon: She sets me up with neighbors who have lived here forever—

Cell phone rings

Sassoon: —and know a lot about the history.

Michou: Oui, allô?

Sassoon: This is Michèle.

Michou: Je m'appelle Michèle Vincent.

Sassoon: But everyone calls her Michou.

Michou: J'ai soixante quinze ans. Je suis née à Millau—

Sassoon: She's 75 and she was born in Millau, the closest town.

Michou: Tu vois?

Sassoon: We're standing in her kitchen, looking at a map of the Larzac.

Michou: Alors attends. Les limites du camp, c'est, c'est ça, le bleu foncé là, ça.

Sassoon: The military camp is right in the middle, a dark blue block, and Michou is showing me another, much larger light blue shape around it, like a ghost.

Michou: Voilà. Ce qu'ils voulaient, c'était tout ça.

Sassoon: Ce qu'ils voulaient prendre.

Sassoon: What they wanted to take.

Michou: Voilà ce qu'il voulait prendre. Voilà exproprier, c'est ça.

Sassoon: Ok.

Sassoon: In 1971, the Ministry of Defense announced that it was going to expand the Larzac camp. The new military zone would extend to the north, east, and west, with a long spur of land to the south. It would be about six times the size of the original camp.

Michou: Et pour cela, il fallait supprimer 107 exploitations agricoles.

Sassoon: To massively expand the camp in this way, the government would have to either buy the land or take it. They would have to eliminate entire farms and displace all the farmers, 107 families. One of those farmers, Christiane Burguière, told me about the night the expansion was announced.

Christiane: Il y avait des bruits qui couraient, le Camp du Larzac allait s'agrandir, mais bon, on n'y croyait pas.

Sassoon: There were rumors going around that the camp would get expanded, but we didn't believe them.

Christiane: On était en train de mettre le couvert pour manger le soir.

Sassoon: We were setting the table for dinner one night when the Minister of Defense came on television and said,

Christiane: J'ai décidé, j'ai décidé que le Camp du Larzac sera agrandi

Sassoon: I decided, I decided that the Larzac camp will be expanded.

In the new map of the camp, Christiane's farm was completely swallowed up. It didn't exist anymore. She and her family were going to be removed.

No one from the ministry had bothered to come and inform her, or inform any of the other Larzac farmers who were facing a similar fate.

> **Christiane:** Et là, on disait souvent, la soupe a refroidi dans l'assiette. Ça nous a coupé l'appétit.

Sassoon: The food on our plates got cold, she says.

> **Christiane:** Et puis quand on a su que c'était officiel, on s'est dit, il faut qu'on réagisse.

Sassoon: And then we said to each other, we have to react.

> **Léon:** Mais petitement, on n'était pas [...] des révolutions.

Sassoon: Léon Maillé is another farmer who heard the announcement that night. He was born and raised on the Larzac. The home where he'd lived all his life was going to be erased.

> **Léon:** Et c'est, c'est le syndicat agricole traditionnel

Sassoon: The Traditional Farmers Union called for a protest in Millau, the local town, about a week after the announcement. It was the first time Léon had ever gone to a protest.

> **Léon:** [...] la première manif que j'ai fait, fin, une promenade. Voilà, c'était tout.

Sassoon: It was basically just a walk, he says. He makes it sound like a small event. But 6,000 people showed up to march.

> **Ginette:** Pour eux ici, c'était un désert, quoi. Il n'y avait personne, c'est quelques paysans.

Sassoon: To the ministers, the Larzac was a desert. There was no one here, just a few peasants.

> **Bernard:** Je pense qu'ils ont fait l'erreur de dire, Vous vivez pauvrement, on va vous, on va vous permettre de vivre beaucoup mieux ailleurs.

Sassoon: They made the mistake of saying, You live poorly here, we're going to allow you to live much better elsewhere.

Bernard: Et ça, les gens se sont sentis un peu humiliés.

Sassoon: And people felt humiliated.

Ginette: Et je pense que au plus la terre est pauvre au plus les gens soient, y soient attachés.

Sassoon: The poorer the land, the more people are attached to it.

Christiane: Nous, on disait, notre terre, surtout pour un paysan, la terre, c'est sacré, c'est la vie.

Sassoon: For a paysan, land is sacred. Land is life.

Sheep, machinery

Sassoon: Twice a day, we milk the flock. We can milk all of them, around 700, in an hour and a half, using the rotolacteur, the rotary milking parlor. I'm not very good at it, but I know enough to make myself useful and otherwise stay out of the way. The milking parlor is a circular platform that spins slowly like a carousel. It fits 32 sheep at a time.

To get on, the sheep gallop up a narrow wooden ramp, single file. When a sheep steps onto the platform, the first thing she does is shove her head through a slot in a row of metal restraints which then lock around her neck. A blue plastic bowl is filled with grain from an automated chute and lifts up to her chin. She nibbles frantically while we milk her from behind with vacuum suckers.

The time it takes for a sheep to ride one full rotation is also the time it takes to empty her udder of milk. Some sheep kick the suckers off. And when we try to get them reconnected, they buck and tap and make it impossible.

Sheep stomping

Sassoon: Their milk gets collected in a chilled steel tank.

Léa: Tu laissais ton micro ici, ferai pas long feu. Elles mangeraient les petits poils là.

Sassoon: Léa's warning me about having a microphone in the barn. She says if I set it down anywhere, the sheep will eat the fluffy windsock.

> **Sassoon:** Elles l'ont déjà léché.
>
> **Léa:** Ah oui, ça m'étonne pas

Sassoon: They've already licked it.

None of the sheep milk actually gets used on the farm. Every couple of days a man pulls up in a truck, siphons the milk from the tank, and drives it away to a nearby village, Roquefort, Roquefort, where it gets made into cheese and cured in caves underneath the village. Roquefort cheese is pungent, tingly, salty, funky, wet, marbled with blue moldy crevices. It tastes like what it comes from: grasses and wildflowers, rainwater, minerals, the bodies of sheep, bacteria in the caves.

It's a record of this place. And legally, Roquefort cheese can only be made here. The state regulates it. The state decides what this land is for.

When the Minister of Defense announced the expansion of the military camp in 1971, It was unclear to the farmers how quickly the expansion was going to play out, and whether they could really do anything to stop it. They were up against the state and the national army.

Some of the old timers said, they're gonna have to drag me out feet first. I'm never leaving. Some of the farmers considered selling. Some considered taking up arms.

What brought them all together into a single organized movement, into what came to be known as *la lutte*, the struggle, was a visit from a strange neighbor.

> **Lanza del Vasto:** Alors j'appellerais de tous les coins de France, des milliers et des milliers de jeunes gens, et des milliers de moins jeunes, pour se mettre en travers de l'opération sans cri ni violence.

Sassoon: Lanza del Vasto was a Sicilian guy with a big white beard and a long cotton robe. He had been a disciple of Gandhi, and he was now an activist and a spiritual leader. He lived near the plateau and a few months after the announcement when it seemed like the resistance might take a violent turn, he came to the Larzac to demonstrate nonviolently against the camp. He undertook a two week fast. Every evening he gave a sermon about nonviolence and civil

disobedience, and by the end of the two weeks, 103 farmers took a solemn oath. They vowed to fight the camp expansion together, in solidarity, nonviolently, and they vowed never to sell their land to the army.

The army, meanwhile, pressed on with its plans. The legal approval process was already underway.

> **Christiane:** Le bruit, le bruit, c'était des bombes, c'étaient des coups de canon...

Sassoon: The air shook, sometimes all day, with the sound of shots and bombs.

> *Distant, muffled explosions*
>
> **Christiane:** ... tout ça pouvait—ta-ta-ta-ta-ta, ta-ta-ta-ta-ta—toute la journée, ça pouvait durer comme ça, ou des matinées entières. On les entendait.

Sassoon: Later that year, in 1972, the farmers organized a particularly splashy nonviolent protest. If they were going to stand a chance against the army, they needed as much popular support as they could get. They needed a national spectacle.

> **Christiane:** Alors là, on était parti la veille et la nuit, à cinq heures du ou quatre heures du matin, il y avait des voitures qui partaient du Larzac pour aller sur le Champ de Mars à Paris.

Sassoon: At four or five in the morning, a bunch of cars left the Larzac and drove north. Christiane was in a truck with her husband, Pierre, and another organizer. They were headed to Paris, to the Champ de Mars, the lawn at the feet of the Eiffel Tower. The Champ de Mars was originally designed to be a military training ground.

> **Christiane:** Et c'était la première fois que Pierre et moi nous sommes allés à Paris, on n'y avait jamais été.

Sassoon: It was the first time she and Pierre had ever been to Paris, and when they got there, just before noon, Pierre hopped out of the truck, looked up the Eiffel Tower and said—

Christiane: Oh, quel tas de ferraille ! Il, à tout effet, il a dit.

Sassoon: What a pile of scrap metal!

Christiane: Et puis après, ils ont lâché les brebis.

Sassoon: And then they let out the sheep.

The truck had been carrying a flock of sixty sheep all the way from the Larzac. They trooped out and started nibbling the lawn. Cops rushed to the scene

Christiane: Et là les flics sont arrivés. Ils ont dit, Mais qu'est-ce que c'est ça? Mais ne vous inquiétez pas, ils ont dit les paysans. C'est un film publicitaire. On tourne un film publicitaire. Ça va être fini.

Sassoon: Don't worry, they told the cops, it's a publicity thing for Roquefort cheese. Which of course wasn't true at all.

Christiane: C'était pas vrai du tout.

Michou: C'était pas vrai du tout, mais après quand ils ont vu les banderoles etc., les gendarmes ont essayé d'attraper les brebis, mais les brebis elles couraient dans tous les sens.

Sassoon: When the police saw the protest banners unfurling, they started running around trying to catch the sheep. But of course the sheep scattered in all directions.

Michou: Et donc c'était, les paysans ne bougeaient pas, bien sûr, ils laissaient faire.

Sassoon: The farmers just stood there. If the military was going to occupy the Larzac, they were going to occupy military land in the capital.

Christiane: Et après les brebis, elles ont crotté partout.

Sassoon: And the sheep were shitting everywhere.

Christiane: (laugh) Oui. Voilà. C'était rigolo.

Sheep baa

Christiane: On a beaucoup ri pendant la lutte.

Sassoon: We laughed a lot during la lutte, Christiane says.

Christiane: Ça nous a aidé ça, énormément.

Sassoon: It helped us enormously. I imagine it brought relief, like rain, to laugh, as la lutte dragged on, year after year.

Chanting, tractors and tanks

Sassoon: Soldiers surveilled the plateau. Army tanks and trucks would speed around, sometimes driving across fields that didn't belong to them, and crushing the face of the pastures. The farmers knew that if they heard someone at their door and opened to find a man with papers in his hand, that they should remain silent. Even if the army couldn't buy the land, because the farmers wouldn't sell, the government could still expropriate it, and the farmers would be evicted.

The farmers reached for roundabout legal protections. Sometimes, they just resorted to mischief.

They mixed up road signs so officers could never find what they were looking for. They put wooden boards with nails in them, pointing up, along ruts in the road, so soldiers would get flat tires. They released sheep into town halls and courtrooms.

For a while, they also got people across France to withhold 3% of their taxes, the percentage that would have gone toward military spending, and to send that money to the Larzac instead. They used it to build a sheep barn together, by hand, from stone, in the old style, with high arched ceilings. The barn stood in the path of the planned expansion.

Road noise

Sassoon: It's forbidden to enter the military camp, but I want to see what I can, so Léa is driving me around the perimeter.

Léa: Donc là, on est sur une petite route. À droite il va y avoir le camp militaire, et à gauche...

Sassoon: We're rolling along a small road. On the left are farm fields. On the right is the camp. There's no fence or anything around it. It comes all the way to the road.

Sassoon:C'est vrai que c'est rien de spécial.

Léa: Non...

Sassoon: If you look right or left, there's not really any visible difference. Flat fields, rocks, a few dark shrubs. The only indication of the camp is a series of “do not enter” signs every hundred meters or so.

Léa: Peut être toutes les 100 mètres, il y a un panneau qui dit, terrain militaire, défense d'entrer—défense de pénétrer.

Sassoon: Closer to the village, we start to see barbed wired and buildings inside the camp.

Sassoon: Commence à voir des bâtiments.

Sassoon: The buildings are identical boxes, lined up in precise rows.

Sassoon: Tu crois que ce sont des baraques?

Léa: Des baraquements? Oui, ça y ressemble.

Sassoon: Léa and I skirt the flat fields designated as firing ranges. Some parts have been scorched by explosions, or balded by tank treads. Other fields lie untroubled, streaked with poppies. A street sign catches my eye.

Sassoon: Rue des harkis?

Léa: Oui.

Sassoon: Harki Street? I've read about harkis before. The term refers to Algerians who helped the French army during the Algerian War of Independence in the 1950s and ’60s.

Sassoon: Est-ce que tu sais—

Sassoon: I ask Léa if she knows much about the camp during the Algerian war.

Sassoon: —le camp pendant la guerre d'Algérie?

Léa: Non. Non. Je sais que c'était une prison, mais—

Sassoon: I know it was a prison, she says, but other than that—

Léa: —après, je sais pas.

Sassoon: Who were the prisoners?

People talk about the military camp all the time. It's the focal point of so much memory and storytelling. But no one ever brings this up.

Ten years before the start of la lutte, this was a prison.

At home I started sifting through books and articles online. The more I gleaned about the decades before la lutte, the more it felt like another story was just out of view.

Almost immediately after World War II, France entered into two other back to back wars. First, the Indochina War in Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam. Then the Algerian War, starting in 1954. The French empire had expanded violently over the course of a century, and now it was collapsing violently.

During the Algerian War, the French government outlined three primary goals for military camps.

Number one, to physically condition recruits by exposing them to, quote unquote, “Algeria-like conditions.” The deserty summers and rocky, arid plains on the Larzac were a perfect rehearsal. Number two, to imbue them with a quote unquote “aggressive spirit.” And number three, to convince them of the quote unquote “value of France’s objectives in Algeria.” But then, halfway through the war, the Larzac camp ceased its training operations.

It closed, temporarily, underwent some rapid renovations, and reopened. It was now heavily surveilled and occupied at full capacity. It was an internment center, a prison camp.

This was what Léa was talking about. It was a place to lock up Algerians in France. There were a few other new centers like it, but the Larzac was the biggest. It was

the main internment camp in France, designed to hold more than 3,000 prisoners at a time, in cramped quarters, indefinitely.

Did people not talk about this because they didn't know? Or because they did? Where was this more brutal local memory being kept?

Airplane noise

Sassoon: The National Archives are just outside Paris, in the northern banlieue, in a gated lot, in a glass and metal building, with a shallow still pool in front of it. The building is encased in a white cage of metal latticework.

Inside, it's spacious and light filled, clean, silent, though the floor squeaks.

In the catalog online, I was able to find maybe a dozen references to the Larzac internment center. Whatever documents have been kept are here, in numbered boxes, from the Ministry of the Interior.

Lockbox beeps

Sassoon: I want to see as much as I can, anything the state has made publicly available. I lug the boxes, one at a time, to the numbered desk I've been assigned in the reading room, and flip through internal reports, budgets, receipts, architectural plans.

Muffled whispering in French

Sassoon: ... Avant d'examiner les divers problèmes que soulève ...

Sassoon: In one of the boxes, I find a summary of the aims of the camp.

Sassoon: ... Il s'agit, en premier lieu, de neutraliser préventivement des éléments considérés comme dangereux ...

Sassoon: The first one is to preventatively neutralize individuals who are considered dangerous to public order but where there's insufficient evidence to bring them before a criminal court.

So, basically the state was arresting Algerians and imprisoning them at the Larzac camp without trial, maybe without substantial evidence, saying it was necessary

for security reasons. If people were even just suspected of being affiliated with the Algerian National Liberation Party, the FLN, they were arrested.

The Larzac camp was a new way for the government to control and incarcerate people.

It was a familiar method: France and Britain had been using administrative detention in their colonies for a long time. The U.S. had created concentration camps to imprison Japanese and Japanese American people in the 40s. France was operating detention centers and relocation camps in Algeria. Israel hadn't started using administrative detention yet to lock up Palestinians, but it would soon. These techniques get worked out over time, sharpened, fine-tuned, justified, normalized. States learn from each other.

Paper rustles

In large maps I can see the camp, as if looking down from above, the way a vulture flying over it might see it. There's a grid of numbered boxes inside. That's where the prisoners lived. A dashed blue line marks the twelve foot high fence enclosing them. The barracks seem to be partitioned into two blocks.The block to the west is labeled the Occident, and the block to the east is labeled the Orient. Each prisoner who arrived to the camp was assigned to one of the two zones. Those considered moderate were placed in the Occident, while those considered irredeemable were placed in the Orient. A miniature colonial geography.

Paper rustles

Wind, clanking

Alex: Normalement, celle-là. Il y a un caoutchouc là qui vient pour bouger ou pas. Donc là, comme il était abîmé, il faut tout démonter.

Sassoon: We're standing in the middle of a barley field.

Alex: Là, on est, on est en plein milieu d'un champ d'orge

Sassoon: Alex, Léa's partner, just harvested it, except for one last strip, about 10 meters long.

Alex: La machine a cassé juste avant de finir.

Sassoon: The combine harvester broke down right before he could finish. He's had to climb inside the combine and basically take the machine apart, take out the radiator, take out all the pulleys, just to get to the broken part next to the engine

Alex: Mais bon, les vieilles machines comme ça,

Sassoon: It's an old machine. Roughly, it occurs to me, the size and shape of an army tank.

Sassoon: Tu vas te faire mal !

Alex: Voilà, je le tiens. Attention, ça risque de couler.

Alex: Voilà. Il est à l'envers.

Grass in the wind

Sassoon: While they work, I put my ear close to the ground. Where the barley hasn't been cut, the wind plays in it, and the bright stalks bend light. Where it's been mown to stubble, the ground crackles, seems to tick.

An archive preserves the voice and the logic of the state, but it keeps other voices, too. In letters, I begin to hear the prisoners speak.

Sassoon: November 6th, 1961.

À Monsieur le Directeur ...

To the Director of the Larzac Center.

Monsieur le Directeur, Depuis l'ouverture de ce camp, les algériens qui y sont internés,

Mr. Director, since the opening of this camp, the Algerians detained here have been subjected to a more and more grueling and degrading regime.

... Actuellement, ils ont atteint le fond de la coupe d'amertume ...

Now they've gotten to the bottom of the cup of bitterness you've administered.

Vous avez cru nous mater avec la force.

You thought you could subdue us by force.

The letter is announcing a prison-wide hunger strike. There’s a stack of other letters with it, all from the same date, written by other hands.

Monsieur, Il ne vous échappe pas que...

It does not escape you that our situation, already hardly enviable, has only gotten worse, to the point that we can no longer bear it.

Monsieur le Directeur,

After making verbal appeals to you, in vain, for the return of our rights as political prisoners.

... nos droits d’internés politiques ...

... we come with this letter to solemnly protest.

protester solennellement

They're written in beautiful cursive, with seething politeness. One of them is signed,

Veuillez agréer, Monsieur le Directeur,

Please accept, Mr. Director, the tribute of our deep respect...

L’hommage de notre profond respect, Les assignés du camp de Larzac.

... the detainees of the Larzac camp.

Hunger strikes were one of the only forms of resistance available to the prisoners. They organized them all the time. It was a way to put immediate pressure on the authorities. There was always something to protest: New repressive rules, poor conditions, inadequate medical care, solitary confinement, confiscation of mail, and also events in the wider war. Sometimes the hunger strikes lasted more than two weeks. The prisoners knew they could survive as long as they drank a glass or two of water a day. The camp authorities knew this too, though, and when strikes broke out, they'd crack down by cutting off the water supply.

But according to a testimony I found by one of the prisoners—

Rain

Sassoon: —their cells had windows, and when it rained, the men inside took their prison bowls to the sills to fill them with water. If they could capture enough, they'd share it with each other, or save it for later, until the taps came back on.

Rain

Sassoon: The Larzac rain, the rain that slides through the ground, helped to keep them alive.

When the war finally ended in 1962, Algeria was declared an independent country.

The prisoners in the Larzac camp were released, but many of them were shipped to Algeria, removed from France, even though they had been living and working in France before their imprisonment, as factory workers, construction workers, service workers.

Sassoon: Ben alors...

Sassoon: Sitting with Michou on her couch. I ask what she knows about this earlier history of the camp. She was still only a kid when the Algerian war ended.

Michou: On avait un voisin qui était gardien au camp militaire. Et je savais que c'étaient des prisonniers algériens qui étaient là.

Sassoon: She says as a child she knew there were Algerian prisoners there, because one of her neighbors worked as a guard at the camp.

Michou: C'était une source d'emploi, le camp. Tu vois? On n'imagine pas.

Sassoon: You don't even think about it, she says, how the camp was a source of employment, not just for military officials, but for local civilians. The camp was, and has always been, an economic lung of the town.

Sassoon: One of the files I found in the archives from when the camp was a prison was a bundle of contracts and correspondence with the local Larzac butchers. The butchers did unbelievable business in those years, supplying meat to the camp. Even the guard dogs needed to eat.

Ginette: Le camp militaire, c'était un camp de rétention. Oui, oui.

Sassoon: Ginette doesn't hesitate either when I ask about the camp during the war. She knows what happened there.

Sassoon: Je sais pas, les conditions du camp étaient—

Ginette: épouvantables.

Sassoon: Appalling, she says.

Ginette: Ils étaient parqués comme des animaux.

Sassoon: They were confined like animals.

Bernard: Non, non, c'était dans les années '50, '60, non non. La plupart des paysans, c'étaient des gens bons chrétiens obéissants. Non, non, ils se sont pas révoltés sur ça, non, non.

Sassoon: Bernard says at the time, in the '50s and '60s, most of the farmers were obedient Christians, not the type to resist or rebel. He and Ginette were still kids then. Ginette says the same, that people obeyed the state as much as the church, that they didn't dream of questioning either. They didn't dare.

Ginette: On n'osait pas, quoi, c'est l'état, il fallait pas y toucher.

Sassoon: But did they know, at the time, what was happening inside the camp?

Bernard: Ils cherchaient pas à savoir, non.

Sassoon: Ils cherchaient pas à savoir: they didn't seek to know.

Ginette: On savait ce qui se passait à côté,

Sassoon: People knew. But it was only later, in many ways because of La Lutte, that people on the Larzac began to look back on the war, and say to themselves—

Ginette: ...reconnaissait après, en disant, on a laissé faire.

Sassoon: —we let this happen.

I heard Bernard talking about one of the young rams this morning, so I ask him about it.

Sassoon: Du coup qu'est ce qui s'est passé avec le bélier ce matin?

Bernard: Bon, je pense que Julien les a vu se battre.

Sassoon: The rams were fighting. They're penned together, and it's normal for them to knock heads. But if one is lying down, and another one stamps on his stomach, that can cause some serious damage.

Sassoon: Et comme ça, il meurt?

Sassoon: And just like that, he dies?

Bernard: Oui, il était mort ce matin.

Sassoon: He was dead this morning.

Sassoon: Et on le laisse au champ?

Sassoon: And you leave the body in the field?

Bernard: Je l'ai emmené au charnier, là-bas.

Sassoon: Bernard says he brought it to the charnier, the charnel ground, a kind of ossuary in one of the farther fields.

Bernard: Un endroit où les vautours viennent. Ils sont venus assez rapidement, ils nettoient tout.

Sassoon: A place where the vultures come. Within hours they clean everything.

Sassoon: Il doit y avoir plein d'os.

Sassoon: There must be a lot of bones there.

Bernard: Ah oui oui oui oui oui, mais les enfants, ils vont toujours aller chercher les os.

Sassoon: But the children always go and collect the bones, he says.

Bernard: Ils font des expositions tout ça, et même des mises en scène. Ils prennent des crânes, tu vois les crânes...

Sassoon: They use the bones to make little exhibits and put on plays. They gather the skulls and decorate the eye sockets with branches.

Bernard: Les enfants n'ont pas du tout la même vision de ce que c'est un squelette.

Sassoon: They don't look at bones the same way we do.

Bernard: Ils imaginent pas que eux mêmes, c'est un squelette.

Sassoon: They don't imagine that they themselves are skeletons.

Bernard: Mais les adultes,

Sassoon: But adults...

Bernard: ...bien que, on finira comme ça quand même.

Sassoon: There's a quotation that's been buzzing around in my head from an essay by W.E.B. Du Bois that he published in 1917. He was looking at what was happening in the First World War and looking at Europe, and he wrote, "The cause of war is preparation for war." The cause of war is preparation for war. Military camps, obviously, and weapons are preparation for war. Anticipation of war.

But Du Bois was talking about something else, too. He was drawing a connection between Europe's century of colonial conquests and the violent global conflict it then found itself tangled in, the First World War. It had to come, he wrote, as if to say, these things are the same. Of course your violence is coming home.

The Larzac camp holds up a similar mirror. It began as preparation for war, in an era of conquest. When that colonial violence finally came home, it was internalized here, on this same little swath of land.

When La Lutte began in 1971, it was a local, somewhat self-interested cause. The farmers saying to the state, "Don't take away our land." But the movement grew, quickly.

Ginette: Il y avait un état d'esprit qui faisait que les gens se révoltaient, surtout tous les jeunes, quoi.

Sassoon: There was a state of mind, Ginette says about the ’70s.

Ginette: Donc le moindre petit truc, c'était pour aller à l'encontre et manifester ou pas.

Sassoon: The littlest thing, people were ready to go out and protest.

At the first march against the Larzac camp expansion, there were a few thousand protesters. Eight months later, there was a demonstration with over 20,000 protesters. And the following summer, in 1973, the farmers organized a mass rally on the plateau. Eighty thousand people showed up.

Speeches

Sassoon: The protesters weren't just farmers and Catholic groups, but also unionized factory workers, anarchists, Occitan nationalists, hippies, pacifists, feminists, Maoists, Trotskyists, members of the Irish Republican Army, and revolutionaries from the Basque country and Palestine and all the way from Chile.

They all stood shoulder to shoulder, on the plateau, in a spot that forms a kind of natural amphitheater, right next to the military camp, on land the army was threatening to claim.

Helicopter

Michou: Il y avait des forums, il y avait des discussions, mais il y avait aussi un podium central avec des musiciens, des chanteurs.

Sassoon: There were talks and debates, but also huge concerts, Woodstock style.

For a lot of activists, the Larzac fight wasn't really about sheep or Roquefort or saving any specific farms. It was a moral cause. The Larzac had become a proxy for anticapitalism, antimilitarism, anticolonialism, environmentalism. The farmers, too, began to see themselves in connection with other struggles.

Singing

Sassoon: But even with all the new solidarity and popular support, the farmers hadn't won. Mainstream media painted the Larzac as a backwater, and the movement wasn't making much practical or legal headway. The army was still encroaching.

And then, in 1974, the farmers held another summer rally. The biggest action yet, with over 100,000 people on the plateau.

Michou told me about what happened.

> **Michou:** C'était très, très animé, et François Mitterrand est venu alors qu'il était pas invité officiellement.

Sassoon: In the middle of the action, someone unmistakable stepped out of a car, a high-profile politician. François Mitterrand.

Mitterrand claimed to be a socialist leader, representing the left, but he had taken positions during the Algerian war that leftists found despicable. He hadn't supported Algerian independence.

He had been part of the regime that poured troops into Algeria and made widespread use of torture. He himself had ordered 45 Algerians to be executed by guillotine, literally beheaded by the French state in the ’50s.

And he showed up to the rally, uninvited, from Paris. No one knew why he had come. He was milling through the crowd, greeting people

> **Michou:** et il a été agressé par des, par des gars que l'on disait d'extrême gauche

Sassoon: Almost immediately, he was attacked, supposedly by far leftists.

> **Sassoon:** Donc il a été frappé?
>
> **Michou:** Oui, mais bon...

Sassoon: People threw beer cans and pebbles at Mitterrand, maybe roughed him up a little bit.

> **Michou:** Ils l’insultaient, je crois, ils l’insultaient par rapport à la guerre d'Algérie.

Sassoon: Mainly they were jeering and shouting at him—things like, “Remember Algeria!”

To leftist activists, Mitterrand seemed like a sly political opportunist, not an ally. It seemed like he was ingratiating himself with the cause to win votes. But also, there was this. Christiane's husband, Pierre, recognized a disguised cop among the attackers. Like, the whole thing might have been staged, to derail the Larzac movement. In the midst of the attack, Pierre and others rushed to surround Mitterrand to stop things from escalating and becoming actually violent. They protected him and moved him to safety.

> **Michou:** Et après, c'est pour ça que il a dit qu'il, s'il était élu, il n'étendrait pas le camp militaire.

Sassoon: Michou says that's why Mitterand later made a promise to the Larzac farmers. He promised them that if he ever became president, he'd stop the expansion of the military camp.

> **Michou:** Il a dit je n'oublierai pas la promesse que je vous ai faite.

Sassoon: I won't forget, he told them.

For the next seven years, the farmers kept fighting. They organized and wrote and went to court and protested in every way they could imagine, all while operating farms that required intense physical labor, and also often raising kids. And by 1980, they were at the end of the line.

> **Ginette:** Les gens étaient épuisés quoi, fatigués, ils en avaient marre,

Sassoon: They were exhausted. It had been a decade.

> **Ginette:** Ils avaient tout essayé, que, rien

Sassoon: They'd tried everything.

> **Ginette:** Les huissiers venaient aller dans les fermes avec la police pour signifier l'expropriation de telle et telle personne.

Sassoon: Bailiffs and police officers were coming to their doors with notices of expropriation. They had only one last fragment of hope, the memory of that

promise from Mitterrand. In 1981, there was a presidential election, and Mitterrand was in the running. In the first round of voting he trailed his opponent by a narrow margin. In the second round, he won.

On the day of the election, it poured rain on the Larzac. One of the first things he did in office was to officially stop the military camp expansion.

> **Léa:** Tu vois là, on voit une ancienne ferme là.

Sassoon: Driving past the camp now, Léa points out that there were some farms that did get swallowed by it.

> **Léa:** Donc quand on va s'approcher, on voit que c'est totalement à l'abandon.

Sassoon: Just beside the road, we pass one. An old stone farmhouse on army land. It's empty and slowly collapsing.

> **Léa:** Il y a de l'herbe qui pousse sur les toits.

Sassoon: There's grass growing through what's left of the roof.

> **Léa:** Là où nous, on est, nous,

Sassoon: Where we live, she says—

> **Léa:** ça aurait fini comme ça si... si nos parents s'étaient pas battus pour nous.

Sassoon: —our farm would have finished like this if our parents hadn't fought for us. It would have become part of the camp and disappeared.

> **Farmers:** Yoann et [...] — Non, c’est pas Yoann. Yoann c’est son frère — C’est son frère — Là c'est Johan, le frère de Yoann.

Sassoon: We’re sitting at a community celebration. It’s a potluck dinner, with lots of tables set up outside, and live music, and a new painting exhibit. Everybody seems to know each other from la lutte.

> *Singing*

Michou: C'est vraiment, c'est vraiment la sortie du troisième âge.

Ginette: Du quatrième!

Michou: Du quatrième.

Sassoon: Michou’s joking about how old they’re all getting now.

Michou: ...du vin. Je préfèrerais du rouge, mais. Merci!

Ginette: Regarde, du rouge, eh?

Michou: Il y en a?

Ginette: Il y a du rouge.

Michou: Je suis fière qu'on ait, qu'on ait pu gagner. Mais bon.

Sassoon: I'm proud we could win, she says, but there's more work to do. Liberation struggles and land struggles continue. France is actively expanding its military capacity. The Larzac camp is full of soldiers. Questions still live here, on the plateau, rattling against the stories people tell, and the ones they don't.

Dogs bark, sheep

Sassoon: It’s time for the sheep to go out to pasture again, but it’s hot out, so they’re stalling.

Sheep, dogs

Léa: Allez, viens, viens. Celle-là, elle est toujours devant.

Sassoon: They’re all clustered just inside the barn door, in the shade, just behind the threshold, looking out.

Léa: Allez, viens, viens, viens, viens, viens, viens, viens! Elles exagèrent, il fait pas si chaud que ça quand même.

Sassoon: They’re exaggerating. It’s not that hot out.

Léa: Et tu vois, il suffit qu'il y en a une qui sorte la pâte—après c’est, c'est bon. Elles vont toutes suivre.

Sassoon: As soon as one sticks one foot out, they’re all gonna follow.

Léa: Allez viens, viens, viens, viens, viens. Allez! Viens, viens, viens. *Ven, ven, ven!* Allez. Allez, viens, viens. Allez. Allez, viens, viens, viens, viens, viens, viens, viens. Allez, viens. Voilà.

Sheep, wind, crickets, dog

Sassoon: I went out for a night walk, and the border collie who barked at me in the milking barn this morning accompanied me. The half moon was rising, and we wandered the fields up toward the high point, where we could overlook the valley below the plateau. He loped ahead, checking over his shoulder frequently to make sure that the distance wasn't growing too large between us. We crested the hill and wandered down a ways. And then as night fell, the dog tucked under the wire fencing on our left and picked up something hard in his jaws. It was not a stick or a stone. It was what the vultures had left behind. It was a skull.

Crunching