

Freedom in the Marshes

Carrie Laben

A review of

The Beast and Other Tales by Jòusè d'Arbaud, translated by Joyce Zonana. Northwestern University Press 2020

"I was happy on this barren land that barely provides what I need to sustain this ancient body, but which grants me the wild wind I cannot live without..."

These are the words of *The Beast of Vacares*, the title character of the title story in Jòusè d'Arbaud's powerful collection. First published in Provençal in 1926 and long treasured in its native land, the book has only now been translated into English. For many American readers it will be their first glimpse of a landscape, way of life, and language that were under threat even at the time this book was written, founded on the freedom of open spaces and solitude.

All of the stories revolve around the lives of *gardians*, or bull-herders, living in the region of France known as the Camargue where they tend wandering herds of cattle, which are intended to perform in bull-fights; tameness is not a desirable trait. The men (and they are, by tradition, all men) who tend them accept a strenuous and solitary life, getting most of their companionship from dogs and horses.

Each story portrays a different *gardian* in conflict with the authorities and laws of the larger world. In "the Beast of Vacares," the narrator both fears and is drawn to the Beast, who is close to death and intimates an older and wilder form of life than the *gardians* themselves. The spectre of the Inquisition and damnation looms over every attempt by the narrator to understand and help this strange creature. In "The Caraco" a *gardian* rescues a young Roma girl who is lost in the marshes, and is brought face to face with the prejudices of his society and the limitations of solitude as a way of pursuing freedom. The would-be hero of "Peire Guilhem's Remorse" finds that his beloved horse is destined for death in the bull-ring and reckons with the economic system he serves. In "The Longline" a man is driven to violence by obsession over a small infraction of private property in a world where shared resources are vital to survival.

Each of these stories is moving in its own right, but they are more interesting given the context of their writing, explained in Joyce Zonana's useful introduction. Jòusè d'Arbaud himself left a promising career as the editor of a literary journal to spend years as a bull-herder. He became a leading activist in the *Félibrige*, a movement to resist the domination of Provençal language and culture by the central authority of the French.

Each of his stories is not only a work of art but a work of that activism. As d'Arbaud forces his characters to confront situations outside of the norms that govern their lives, they are also works of psychology and calls to freedom.

Carrie Laben is the author of the novel *A Hawk in the Woods* and the forthcoming novella *The Water Is Wide*. Their work has been awarded the Shirley Jackson Award in Short Fiction and Duke University's Documentary Essay Prize.

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Fifth Estate #408, Winter, 2021

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