

Anna Claire Mullen  
310 Colonial Drive  
High Point, NC 27262

Treleven  
164 Mitchell Drive  
Vergennes, VT 05491

Ahoy Cheryl, Don, and others!

We know each other slightly, but, as a writer's retreat applicant, I'll fill you in a bit more. More than anything I love writing about animals. While at Middlebury (I graduated in May), I studied literature and environment, and my most enthusiastic writings were consistently about various members of the animal kingdom and our relationships to them. I am from the Piedmont of North Carolina, and am now working with children in the Blue Ridge Mountains as an environmental educator where I am trying to model a truly interdisciplinary and integrated approach to getting to know our nonhuman neighbors. I believe our ideas about economics, sustainability, justice, race, and violence begin with the question of the animal. This inspection of the othered, animal body is almost always the nucleus of my spiritual and artistic life.

A true retreat is not from, but towards — an immersion into the lives of the creatures closest at hand, overhead, or underfoot. My proposal for the Treleven writer's retreat is simple in design but challenging in other respects.

I find your sheep an endless source of entertainment, even as they stand motionless except for their busy little mouths tracing oblong paths. They are mesmerizing. I am also fascinated by the variety of comforts and discomforts we take in our attitudes towards domesticated species. I've written much about the ideas of animal cohesion beyond the individual (superorganism, mating pair, pregnant mother, flock, hive, Gaia Theory, etc.).

At the same time I like to look for differentiation, aberration, and individualization within these flocks. My project would be a series of vignettes of your flock: "Vignettes de Moutons," like something inspired by John Aubrey's *Brief Lives*. Could I, as a stranger to your flock, and in a relatively short period of time, come to differentiate your sheep by my written observations?

Aside from having a focused question to guide and discipline my work, this project has at least two important implications for writing and animal welfare:

### 1. The Matter of **Genre**

Would it end up being closer to the Canterbury Tales Prologue or read like truncated data in a field notebook? I'm not much for distinguishing between the essence of the scientific method and a systematized but whimsical poetic inquiry, especially when I am introducing to children the methods behind *how we look at nature*. You can't quite plan to stumble. And it is by experimentally stumbling that we find ourselves in little puddles of genre where we can muck about in the written word in order to see our natural subjects anew, to query what we think we see — what we *swear* we saw!

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## 2. The **Practical / Ethical** Axis

a) What do case studies or portraits of individual farm animals do for us? For you, their shepherds? For the artist? For a stranger? For your sheep? These are questions of the ethics of the craft of writing, and of the way we *think* about animals. Through writing, might something be gained in terms of understanding matters of precision, individuality, animal cognition, personality, idiosyncrasy, and emotion?

b) A Word We Need to Talk About: **anthropomorphism**. We need much finer tools for this word than the clunky ones we use now. We need nuance and caution to avoid, in one sense, muddling all the colors together in a brownish generalization about all animals, and in another sense, to avoid denying other species the characteristics we have simply not yet discovered in them, but to which we hold no unique claim.

I think of that great little essay by E. B. White about his geese, which has received a lot of criticism for his great ‘crime’ of projecting his emotions onto a dying gander. White has been accused of anthropomorphizing to the point where he does a disservice to the goose by failing to see the goose’s particular experience, or *umwelt*. I intend to investigate the nature of such a ‘crime.’ While I do not set out for this project to be metaphoric or allegorical, can it help but be such a thing? If one makes observations in order to distinguish and develop each sheep on paper, is it a useful tool for other people? Is it emotionally useful for anyone? Does it do anything at all for your sheep? Can an entertaining poem, for example, be a form of activism, or shift the way we think and relate to other people and species? This is the simple experiment I, as a guest, am setting out to do.

Thank you for designing this retreat for kindred spirits, and for considering my proposal. I hope you are well.

Warmly,

Anna Mullen