

A Shepherd in Winter - Laurie Maus, Hawk Hill Farm

As I lay nestled under the duvet listening to the morning weather - “-23 with a wind chill of -30” – I chant my winter shepherd mantra – “What the hell were you thinking?”. At -40 I add “I could have been in a villa in Tuscany right now”. I drag myself out of bed in a house that was built in an era when upstairs heat and insulation was considered optional. Fleece PJs and fluffy socks – a TSC vision of loveliness.

If I am lucky Bob has the stove going before I get downstairs. There is oatmeal for breakfast with a bit extra for the chickens. I am training them to come when they are called with oatmeal bribes. If you think that you look like an idiot herding sheep without dogs, try chickens.

Now the ordeal of getting dressed for chores: insulated coveralls, my dork hat with ear flaps, neoprene gloves, neoprene boots, ice cleats. If I ever give up farming I could find employment as a dominatrix.

A stilt legged shuffle to the barn. Oh, you say, the warmth of sheep wafting over me when I open the door. No, the barn was built by the same folks that thought heat in the house was for wusses. It is a drafty, old bank barn where we house very few sheep but keep the hay, the water and the feed. The sheep are in paddocks with run-in sheds scattered around the barnyard. Water sloshing over my coveralls freezes instantly. I recite the mantra again.

I look over the breeding groups: a red butt here, a blue butt there. It is starting to look a lot like Christmas and the tune comes to mind. I am jostled by the sheep as I fill feeders; the guardian dogs are prancing in the snow. I am starting to wake up, to warm up.

Like with childbirth, I know I will forget all of this when I see the lambs frolicking in the spring pastures. A pushy ewe dumps the bucket down my boot; here comes the mantra again.