

**ANIMAL BEING: EXTRACTS
FROM THE PIANPICOLLO DIARY
BY ALICE BENEZIA**

Pianpicollo Selvatico is an ancient place-name for a land that welcomes a farmstead surrounded by woodlands and pastures, in an isolated valley in southern Piedmont. It is a home to a rich community of living and non-living beings.

Patient and generous, over the past few years it has also been home to me, and along with me a small group of creatures, traditionally thought of as farm animals. As of today, two donkeys and three horses, two pigs, four hens and a rooster. They came here as a gift, sometimes in distress, through various encounters and often difficult circumstances. Some already old, some just born, some in the prime of their lives. They are species that have been domesticated for millennia and selected in more recent times with increasing, brutal precision, to fulfill specific functions. Programmed in their behavior and genetic expression.

In Pianpicollo they no longer have a functional life; they are not eaten or put to work. They are free to move around the valley during the day and return, at different times, to shelters of various shapes and sizes where they take refuge for the night.

I am conducting with them an experiment

of mutual care and transformation.

I tend to observe them, to pay attention, to be with them without any particular purpose, other than the daily feeding and cleaning rituals. I feel their presence – and mine – as life in a form.

Sometime we cross each other during the day, while busy in our own affairs, as one would meet a friend on the road. We improvise the rhythm of the days, according to weather, season, dangers and opportunities. We make dates and we show up on time, unless serious impediments occur.

When the dark comes, I take notes on the events of the day.

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Extracts from the Pianpicollo diary¹

2021

5 November

In the afternoon, as the sun begins to wane, I set out to look for the horses. They graze freely and usually stop at the edge of the large meadow, within sight of their home – and mine. I do not see them. I keep walking for a while and find them beyond the ridge that opens onto a

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¹ This part of the text is an extract from: Alice Benesia 2022, "Inhabiting the wild" in: Claudia Losi 2022. *Being There. Oltre il giardino*, edited by Leonardo Regano, VIAINDUSTRIAE publishing, pp. 26-31. Translated by Bennett Bezalgette-Staples

green amphitheatre. It is the first time I have seen them eating peacefully beyond the edge of the meadow. I remember the numerous attempts to get them used to grazing there with a wire fence over the years. Anxious at not seeing the house, as soon as I moved away they would break the wire and gallop back to the little garden in front my kitchen door. From there they would calmly wander off again towards more open spaces, but always within eyeshot. After a few attempts, I suspended the experiments to keep them beyond the ridge, asking the large meadow for a greater effort to bear their grazing over time.

After a lifetime of confinement and instructions, moved from stalls to paddocks, amid stables, trailers, competitions and parades, my horses are slowly gaining a taste for freedom. In a fleeting moment of contentment, I call them and take them back to the stable for the night.

10 November

This morning, Luigi calls me to tell me that my horses are in his meadow. He breeds cows and owns a lot of land. I apologise but he tells me it's fine. That pasture will be re-sown in the spring and the horses can stay there as long as they want. I go visit them anyway; I find them a twenty-minute walk from home, peacefully grazing in the sun, in a wonderful place. I leave them there and return at dusk. They have not moved. Facing southwest, the

meadow is particularly welcoming, warm and still covered in a rich variety of plants.

We go back home together, on a long walk. I notice a sense of fullness in me, the feeling of being able to occupy a slightly larger inner space. Once in the barn, I watch them quickly doze off.

21 November

Luigi's meadow is blessing us with a beautiful autumn. Every day I let the horses loose near the barn; I meet them at sunset in that pasture, and walk back home together. I notice a correspondence between their range, the outer space they feel confident to explore and occupy, and the inner space I grant to my animal being. Both are expanding.

22 December

Just before sunset, I walk out to look for the pigs. At lunchtime, I had seen one far away, a tiny, round, grey shape at the end of Franco's field, on the edge of a chestnut forest. I set off in that direction, but once there, I see no one.

I follow a winding path, around the edge of the forest and see an inner track that leads back home. At the crossroads I come across Poldo eating acorns beneath an oak tree. He greets me like a party pooper. I stand behind him and encourage him to start off along the little road, towards home. He comes round to the idea that it's time to move, but not in the direction I'm trying to move him in. I insist. So does he. I sense his precise intention and decide to follow it. I stop pushing him with my voice

and movement, changing pace, slowing down, remaining silent as I start to follow him. I quickly realise he is heading home, but simply not along my path. In no time, I find myself in the thick of the forest, clambering uphill along a small, well-trodden track, clearly very familiar to my walking companion, probably inherited from wild boars and shared with them. Small and sturdy, Poldo ploughs through the tangle of brambles and fallen branches with ease. I have to bend down, at times almost crawling. In a turning of the tables, I slowly and clumsily struggle to keep up with him. It turns out to be a shortcut, and a few minutes later we emerge behind the stable. Baldo is already there, waiting for us.

Often have I seen the paths of wild animals intertwine with mine, but never have I had the privilege of a guide. Once again, I experience a sense of expansion.

2022

30 January

Isidora died today, attacked from above by a bird of prey. Over the years she had escaped many attacks. She was agile, bright and friendly. She was Archimedes the cockerel's favourite. I find the remains of her little white body beneath a cherry tree near the house. Scattered feathers lie everywhere. Archimedes is mute and still, in a bush next to her. His gaze is fixed; he can't move away. We remain there together for a while. Death makes a vast silence.

How far into the wild can a creature that has been domesticated for millennia venture?

31 January

This morning I buried Isidora. At dusk, Luigi's meadow is suspended above a sea of fog, dotted with an archipelago of hilltops. The horses follow me home. I realise that my thought was misplaced. The issue is not returning to the Eden of some hypothetical lost wilderness, a topologically impossible trajectory, but moving towards a certain fullness of being, alive here and now. I greet Archimedes, already asleep in the henhouse with Marta and Cloe.

On the doorstep, I am reminded of the words of Elizabeth Costello: "One name for the experience of full being is *joy*."²

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² J.M. Coetzee 1999, "The lives of animals", Princeton University Press.