

Attila

I was a dog in my last life. Now that I have left my body in a mysterious and tragic way, I am pure spirit.

A part from the praiseworthy offer of a donation from some elderly lady without heirs, which demonstrates that some kind feelings exist – even though these are of little comfort now – I have discovered that we, wandering spirits, we who have been denied a decent burial, we the unwitting desaparecidos can make ourselves felt in the world of the incarnate. We can wriggle into dreams and suddenly awaken the dreamer while he nimbly captures our messages with a butterfly net. So I'll take advantage of the delicate sleep of a friend of animals to make sure we are not forgotten and this will allow us to find peace.

Will anyone be interested in the story of a mongrel, a mere mutt, adopted with his friend Emy by a wandering man who had the heart to take us to his home, feed and shelter us, on the top of a hill in the middle of wilderness?

How strange that you should be interested in vagabond spirits! Don't worry, you're not alone. You, like me, know that we exist. You have already met some of us in your dreams: open eyed or sleeping, snoring or silent.

If you have loved a four legged friend, dog, cat, horse, goat or rabbit, what difference does it make? None at all, for me. I'm not racist, nor classist, but internationalist and anarchist (thanks to the lessons the wanderer taught us, but I'll tell you about that later)

Even if the family pedigree got lost due to original sin in times gone by, luckily we mutts don't have to conform with standardized beauty, we shine for our multiform intelligence, thanks to our freedom to mate as we please.

We have some faithful friends among humans, we get on with them and see the camouflaged candor within them – they are our few real friends!

All this to say that in my brief animal life, I found beings who were able to love me, those with the heart of a child in the body of a man and a sensitive soul in the body of a woman.

(I will say naught about my killer. . . . or rather, if he were connected via ether, I would tell him to adopt one of my brothers, abandoned through superficiality and inability to love, if he wants my forgiveness.)

Some people hated me because of my canine turbulence. I used to bark, racing back and forth, at anything that moved; cars, people, motorbikes and undefined shadows. Despite my slight body I had lots of energy – I was always small, even though my man called me Attila. My tail, left long, curled over my back like a question mark, with a few brown patches here and there to break the creamy white background of my coat (more dirty than creamy, to be honest).

I also had the habit of rolling over on my back in front of my neighbor, a honey colored cat with two bewitching, emerald eyes. When she came outdoors, attracted by my barking, I melted like butter. Her lady appeared at the door and used to say “Attila, Attila, be quiet!” with gentle reprimand, and would add “you sweet little thing”. I was crazy about that tone of her voice, so warm. Then, happily, I would bow down before her, stretching to show my full length. Then after racing round and round in crazy circles I would lie in front of the two, impassible emerald eyes that had taken note of my every move. For my last performance, and to show my peaceful intentions, I would roll over to show my pink belly, bending my back to one side then the other. I wasn’t bad at stretching, not bad at all.

To reward me, or maybe to quieten me down, the lady would give me a sweet biscuit which I gulped down in a trice; I felt it sensuously slide from my tongue down my throat. Once swallowed, with supreme delight, I would lick my lips and sit – well mannered – ready to receive a second, a third biscuit.

At a certain point the lady’s melodious voice would say “Hey, I can’t play with you all day! It makes me so sad to see you always alone, so love starved, begging for affection. I know, I know, all you want is a little cuddle . . . yup, dogs are love-dependent . . . but you can’t come inside, you see, this is Missy’s house. If I let you in you’d make the sofa your own: a thing that Missy would never put up with, she’s so jealous of her territory.”

While Emy – my friend - was with me I didn’t mind this refusal. Emy was a black little dog with a long coat, she must have been at least twice my size. My nose reached her underarms. We met during our wayfaring days, in lost fields. After a few sniffs and pees we made a pact of solidarity: together in good times and bad. So

when we were adopted by the wandering gentleman, who everyone called Johnny, we stayed together.

Emy was very affectionate and patient. When she gave off that strong smell that got me so excited, she would sit down so that I could put my nose right there, and lick her. I tried to mount her but at that point she leapt up and immediately underlined the difference in sizes. As if to say that ours was an impossible love.

I would never have thought, then, that I could ever love Missy and her lady, whose name was Ambretta. The kindness of both touched my lost and restless heart.

Ambretta used to leave the door slightly open so that Missy could come and go at her will. So I too could peep inside and observe their secret lives. Sometimes my beautiful cat with the emerald eyes would sit on the door step to enjoy the fresh breeze on that hill, not surprisingly called 'Bellavista'. I always had a lot to do because of the comings and goings of the residents, Ambretta, Johnny and their friends, all of whose vehicles I recognized, even those of the farmer laborers who passed on their way to the vineyards.

I still remember the day Ambretta moved in. It was the end of September - the grape harvest. The removals van had just arrived and Emy and I were brim-full with excitement. Coming from the opposite direction was a tractor with a trailer full of dark grapes. I noticed the smile on Ambretta's face: she considered it a good omen that her arrival coincided with an abundant harvest.

I wonder if Ambretta's smile was, on the other hand, in response to the coy yet irreverent smile of the divine youth, he too among the invisible, who was playing with his garland of vine leaves and laurel while sitting on top of the mound of grapes. Their smiles were in synchrony. Ambretta did not see the shadow of the two old laborers who were scrutinizing the new tenant, surprised she should be so preoccupied with the position of the flower pots: they were old and weak and kept to themselves. They all immediately loved Ambretta, her delicate soul, her loving care for all living creatures. Ancestors and protectors of the place were all there to bless her arrival.

Johnny and Ambretta became good neighbors. When Johnny went away, which was often, Ambretta took care of us; whereas when, rarely, Ambretta went away he used to look after Missy and the plants. Like all women, Ambretta would have accepted his courtship had there been one. Johnny was younger and too involved in

his travels and fleeting, exotic women: sentimental involvement was not on his agenda. I once overheard a piece of their conversation while he showed her the photographs taken during one of his many travels, in which equatorial landscapes taken from boats and breathtaking sunsets were interspersed with the radiant faces of amber skinned girls.

“Johnny, have you ever been in love?” she asked unwavering from her foremost thought. I was curious to see how my man would react to that stiletto pointed at his solar plexus. It was an embarrassing question, which needed reflection or else a certainty that I doubt Johnny had. He would have had to answer with another question, like: “Do you know what love is? In how many forms does it exist? And how can you tell the difference between sexual pleasure, that incorporates everything and that other thing that makes you dream and sigh, and keeps you waiting, breath-bated for what you don’t know?” It’s serious, too serious. How can you reply?

“No, I don’t think I’ve ever been in love; and, quite frankly, I don’t think I need to. I’m fine as I am, for now.

Freedom was high among the priorities of my man. He worked for several photographic agencies that sent him around the world to capture images to sell to luxury magazines and touch up for advertisements. He sometimes travelled for several weeks, even months. Then Ambretta became our dog-sitter seeing as she stayed put on her hilltop. It was lovely up there, cool, with a line of acacia trees to protect the house from the road towards the valley, and with nearby fruit trees here and there, a bit wild but generous with their flowers in spring and fruits in summer. There was also a bamboo copse which, I think, has been marked by Emy’s presence. It was there that she decided to die one spring morning, after an illness that had left her skin and bone: Johnny said it was multiple sclerosis. But I don’t want to sadden myself thinking of that. Ambretta took care of her burial, asking the farm workers to dig a deep, decorous grave. These are little signs of caring for us, the travel companions of your intricate lives, we who never tire of hearing your words, your feelings. I don’t know if it is only loners who do this, but Ambretta always talked to Missy, who followed her words with intensity, like a sphinx, in total, unperceivable empathy. I have come to learn that not only dogs but cats too come to look like their owners. Ah, I have never liked the word ‘owner’ because it implies possession, a hierarchy between man and animal. As I often say, how can you call someone your

owner if he isn't even the owner of his own life? Owner of what? Does he perhaps decide when, where and how he will die, leave the body-form in which we temporarily live?

I often heard Ambretta say to Missy "do you know that I love you? You are my spiritual guide, your presence keeps alive my ability to love. You are the only one who shares my days, the good and the bad. You beat me to the computer, while I tidy up dispersed papers. You are the one who shares my bed, always searching for physical contact, you wake up if I get out of bed, you memorize the times of my morning habits, licking my nose or walking over me if I am late to wake up and get out of bed. Missy, my beloved, what great spirit inhabits your tender little body?"

I used to listen with curiosity, sitting at the door with my tongue hanging out of my mouth. I would pretend to have just arrived after a long run, while really I'd been there some time, eavesdropping. I had good reason: I was in love with the beautiful Missy, diminutive of Artemisia, in honor of Artemisia Gentileschi – as Ambretta once said. From my stand point I heard everything: every fragment of those sentences became a piece of my own personal jigsaw that I would carefully place amongst the others while strolling in the fields.

Missy spent many an hour taking care of her looks. Her honey colored coat with a few black, brown and blond stripes deserved it. Her coat was long and silky, no doubt very soft. I was crazy about the white star on her chest, the tufts that grew out of her ears, her paws like white ballet shoes. She was long and leggy, taller than me. I heard that only female cats had that color, that my beloved came from San Francisco, a breed called Maine Coon – what strange words!

I confess that my wish to be adopted depended, among other things, on my desire to hear those sweet words flow into my chest. Yes, I have good ears and a tender heart.

Lots of people visited that house, they came, they went, but for whatever reason Ambretta opened her heart to only Missy. Her thoughts, her worries and her fears. In particular she talked of her love affairs (which the cat had witnessed) with Missy, or should I say with Missy and I, seeing as the open door was a permanent invitation, as I saw it, for me to listen in. Ambretta's voice was just as you would expect it to be: warm, rich with emotion.

I often heard her cry, whisper, shout, but what I loved was her laugh. Her laugh was contagious, it gurgled from the tummy. Hearing it I would start to run in wild circles. I don't know why but I'd bark with glee waiting for her to come so that I could show off my pink belly and get a gentle tummy rub. I often recall those special moments in which some magic spell took over. I would lie about a yard from the door while Missy slept curled up on the door step. Celestial music came from the record player, sounds like water and wind, a piano that aroused sublime feelings.

I knew that every evening, before sunset, Ambretta went for her walk. When I didn't stay home, waiting for her return, I would guide her because I knew that land like the back of my hand. Blackbirds flew out of the trees and pheasants ran like hares. Once a beautiful hen pheasant, who was rather fat, got shot and I remember Ambretta shouting that those "murderers with license to kill" were too close to the house, where along with empty cartridges, fell hundreds of lead bullets, made to kill my brothers and sisters.

Ambretta preferred the path that went to the woods because she liked to bring home pieces of wood and pine cones to start the fire in winter. In the spring she liked to pick wild flowers and in the summer apricots, plums and figs.

A sweet harmony reigned over us: each of us content, our hearts in peace, invisibly connected by affection. Those who came to visit savored our serenity, there was an exchange between nature and ourselves that regenerated the spirit. I loved to look at Ambretta's glowing face as she embraced the olive trees, the cypresses and the pines with her gaze. After each walk she would sit outside, looking at the sunset, Missy would join us as we sat in silence to take in the beauty.

No fence or gate enclosed our land because a road ran through it. It led to the vineyards and to the house where a neighbor lived. He would pass by sometimes in his jeep. Not that he needed to, he just liked to peep in through the half open door. During the night strange cars arrived with clandestine lovers and drug addicts. A sordid lot as Ambretta and Johnny would say, looking at the used condoms, tissues and syringes left scattered on the ground. After a while the beauty of nature was diseased like a dump yard, which made my people furious.

" They have no respect for anything or anyone. They treat this quiet, country road as if it were a public trash can! This is their payment for a moment of hidden lust! Who is supposed to clean up their mess? Their lack of respect and selfishness make me

mad. Those barbarians! They violate the magic of this place, destroy what belongs to us all. Not to mention those filthy men who pee in the hedge near the house, always in the same spot, making a latrine of our garden. And the stench remains for us who live here. Theirs is ignorance, they don't understand that we are all interconnected. Nature is our fundamental home, our oxygen, our food, our water; our mother to whom we will return as ash. Those who don't respect nature don't respect the feminine principle of life!"

Ambretta would rant like this to Missy, and when she could, to Johnny. They then armored themselves with gloves and trash bags and shovels and cleaned up other people's garbage, so much that it filled several plastic bags.

Being open land, with no enclosures, all sorts of beings arrived at Bellavista. After I left my body I watched over the place and people I loved, still attached to that little lawn in front of the house, to the harmony that filled the air: it was like a magnet that kept me present. One day a friend of mine who lived along the asphalt road, in one of the large houses where wealthy people lived, came barking around Ambretta's car.

My lady got out and started talking to my brother, thinking he was the farmer's dog. She called him with the wrong name but her tone was, as usual, warm and friendly. "what's the matter, Wolf? Are you lost? Where's your owner?"

Ambretta went to the field hoping to find the farmer's jeep but, not finding it went home and phoned him to say that his dog was at her place. She was stunned to hear that the farmer's German Shepherd had died a few months before.

The false Wolf was still outside waiting for her. Ambretta gave him some food and water and asked him "so who are you? Where do you come from? What's your name?" She decided to call him Uly, diminutive of Ulysses the traveler. She then looked him over carefully: he was a beautiful example, still young, with a shiny, black and tan coat and perfect teeth. He wore a collar and she tried to find something written there: nothing. Uly sat with his tongue hanging out and looked at her with penetrating eyes. He seemed to like where he was, no gates or fences, just wide open space. What's more he had found someone to nourish him.

Reading Ambretta's thoughts I realized that she was worried about Missy who was indoors and it was unlikely that Uly was used to other animals, let alone cats. Ambretta looked for a meaning to Uly's immediate trust in her. Did he need help?

She remembered that there was a veterinarian clinic nearby. She thought of the other houses in the area and the dogs that lived there, perhaps someone was looking for Uly. So she wrote a notice and stuck copies along the main road. In front of the newsagent, the pharmacy and at the bus stop.

A friend of hers who knew about these things told her that he should have a tattoo on his thigh which would allow the police or a vet to trace his owner. They found the tattoo near his groin but hair had grown over it making it difficult to read, moreover Uly didn't like being handled so it was impossible to decipher.

My brother was delighted. He was free to roam the fields and bark at everyone who came close to the door, neighbors included. Ambretta tried calling him "Uly, come here! Stop barking! Here boy!" . . . sometimes he obeyed but more often he seemed not to hear her at all.

He needed a kennel. Till then the warm summer weather meant he could sleep outside on a wicker armchair with a cushion, but now he needed proper shelter. When they went for walks he needed a leash to keep him from barking at people and jumping up. He ate so much! Ambretta had always had small dogs: Uly, by comparison was a giant!

I was pleased that Uly had found Ambretta. I already knew him: he lived nearby but I can't say he was a close friend. He lived in a huge house with a lovely garden but his owners didn't love him much, he spent most of the time alone, poor love.

Days passed by and Uly, who was not Uly, proved to be intelligent, good looking, blue blooded, but he did not recognize his new name. He refused to come when called. I could feel Ambretta's anguish, she would have liked to adopt him, but the house belonged to Missy. She was closed indoors, suffering from claustrophobia and a sense of abandon. Ambretta decided she would take Uly to the local veterinary clinic. At the entrance Uly immediately showed that he knew the place. He refused to go in, whining, almost crying. It was obvious he did not have happy memories of the vet. With a muzzle on his nose they managed to read the tattoo on his thigh. Ambretta refused the vet's offer to keep him. She didn't want to betray him to unloved hands. So she instructed the vet to let her know if his rightful owners claimed him.

After the evening walk Ambretta was sad. She explained to Uly that she couldn't keep him, this was Missy's territory. Neither was used to the other and she doubted they could live peacefully together indoors.

Uly, open mouthed, listened to Ambretta staring questioningly. His expression was no less intelligent, vivacious or expressive than that of smart people. With upright ears so as not to lose one word of what she said with her loving voice, Uly knew it was a sad moment. I will never forget that woeful evening.

"My sweet Uly," Ambretta said "you chose me to protect you. You ran away from whatever or whoever, like an orphan you want to be adopted, but sooner or later they will come to take you back. Your coat is too shiny, you are too healthy to be a stray. Someone must have looked after you, perhaps a woman seeing as you chose me, a woman, to protect you. Perhaps I remind you of her? Uly kept looking at her, mesmerized by her voice. "You'd make a wonderful companion, we could go for long walks together and you would make me feel safe, protected from sinister people. It would be a relationship of mutual support! It would be great to be able to count on your presence but I just can't. The garden is not fenced, Missy is confined to the kitchen, and no one would look after you if I went away. I consider you a guest, a visiting friend, dear Uly. We must come to terms with the fact that one day we will part. Life is so short: brief encounters are like gifts, to be enjoyed before the inevitable separation. Uly began to whine, he seemed to understand what she said and he knew that he would soon have to leave her. That was the last time they sat together, watching the sun set from the top of the hill.

The next morning at about eight o'clock Ambretta heard the noise of a car pull up in front of the house. No one knocked or rang the bell. She opened the door and found a station wagon with the hatch door open and Uly sitting inside. The driver said that he and his wife had been told by the vet where their dog was. They had been away for two days and Roy (Uly's real name) had disappeared. The year before Roy had been drugged by burglars and had never regained his full sense of smell. His wife had been very worried. The man got in the car and drove off without so much as a thank you.

In a way Ambretta was relieved, but in another she was angry at being treated so badly. She had spent time and money looking after him, she had done all she could to find his owners and this was all the thanks she got, treated like a maid or, worse, like a thief. She was, however, curious to know more about Roy. She phoned his

owner and spoke to the wife. Roy was not so young, eight years old. The woman thanked her for not leaving him at the vet's, he would certainly have suffered being in a cage and the vet was by no means a gentle man. The woman seemed to be a kind person and was very caring as she spoke of Roy, this made Ambretta feel better: "mission completed" she thought sadly.

Missy finally went outside and lay down to soak up the sunshine from the door step of the house at Bellavista.