

*Prelude*

*(Note to the reader)*

'Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita mi ritrovai...' Halfway through my life I found myself. That's it. I found myself, and the forest around us helped.

Ten years ago, at thirty something, I would probably have felt more like Dante did at the beginning of the Divine Comedy. Lost. But something happened four years ago when I turned forty. I took charge of my life, rather than let it drive me around, and things started to fall into place.

Happiness is not about achieving pleasure, a wise man once said, it's about not being driven by desire.<sup>1</sup> You'll know when you've reached happiness because there will be no need to feel differently, no longing to change the state you're in.

That's where we are now – us and the sheep. This is an assumption, of course. I don't know exactly how the sheep – Henry, Jonathan, Orpheus-Pumpkin and Jason – perceive our life here but they too seem happy, content, a kind of contentment that perhaps can only come with age when the anxious zeal of youth starts to give way to a calmer disposition as one becomes more settled in one's environment and one's skin, if – IF – one is lucky enough to live in a moderately peaceful and safe place, which for a sheep in this world is a miracle rather than the norm.

I'm writing this book because I want people to know that they were here, that we were here, together, and that, at least for a while, it was perfect.

*Blue Mountains, 22 October 2022*

*Fugue*  
(With J minor)

*Knock knock... KNOCK KNOCK ... BASH ....BOOOOOOM*

*Come on! Open up! The others are on their way, they are going to eat all my peanuts if you don't hurry up!*

I don't really know what Jason is saying when he is kicking the door to D's writing room but what I imagine he is saying can't be too far from the truth. He doesn't like to compete with others for treats, that's why he often comes to the door by himself. When Jonathan sees his intentions it gives him the idea and he follows, then Henry and finally also Pumpkin. By the time the others have reached the door, Jason has already left, with or without peanuts. He likes being with his sheep companions and doing sheep things together – he is by definition a doer: restless, curious, always ready for action – but he also likes his little intimate moments with the humans when he can feel *special*. It has nothing to do with his size, I think. He's the smallest of the four, while Pumpkin is the largest. Pumpkin also shows the need to feel special. Henry and Jonathan don't, they like their cuddles and their treats but they are not too fussed if they have to share. It could be because Henry and Jonny were raised by sheep rather than humans as in Pumpkin's case and most likely also Jason's. Pumpkin was raised by us – sheep and human – while Jason was found abandoned in a brickyard but he showed clear signs of having lived as a companion to humans.

I have researched in the area of animal studies for over a decade, and have lived closely with sheep for roughly the same timeframe. The evidence is clear: other animals are completely comparable to humans in everything that matters: they have the capacity to experience pain and joy, they love, they grieve, they play, they observe social norms, they help others, they cheat, they think, they believe, they evaluate things, they need the freedom to make decisions about their lives and

those of their children, they solve problems, they create them, they can come up with ingenious solutions, they can also sink into despair.

Commonalities of brain/body structure and processes in human and nonhuman animals enable us to predict with high probability what an animal may be feeling in a particular situation. For example, if a sheep loses her child or best friend, her brain will kick-start processes that will lead to the experience of loss and grief, just like human brains do. In terms of quality and intensity of experience, the sheep's grief is completely comparable to the grief of a human.

Details concerning their *thoughts*, on the other hand, are more elusive. It's easier to predict how they feel compared to what they think. When we live with other animals and get to know them better, we can make informed guesses as to what they may be thinking, even in the absence of a common verbal language. The same is true for them: they too learn to guess what our thoughts and intentions may be. Nevertheless, many questions remain unanswered, and a lot of important information uncommunicated.

It's not that I don't try. I talk to them all the time, and they probably talk to me.

*Why did you let that dog approach? Couldn't you smell that we were scared?*

I know dogs make you uncomfortable but he was lost and we had to look after him.

There's so much I'd like to ask my sheep and so much I'd like to tell them. There are also times when I'm glad I can't.

\*

A note on the possessive pronoun in the title: There are many instances where possessive pronouns should be avoided as they reflect an objectifying attitude. Here, however, the 'my' is used in its affectionate capacity, conveying intimacy: they are indeed *my* sheep as much as I am *their* human (or whatever they call me), no sense of possession intended.



2022

Three years ago, on this day, Charlie died.

October is a big month for us, isn't it? There's always something major that happens in October. Ten years ago, 2012, it was October when we moved into this place.

A few weeks later Henry and Jonathan joined us. A friend alerted us to a note outside the co-op: someone was trying to rehome two sheep. Sheep? Why not?! We jumped into Vinnie (the old van, named after van Gogh, which we had recently purchased so we could move houses at our own pace) and drove down the mountains to pick them up. That's how it all started. The following year, also in October, Pumpkin joined us, and then Jason just over a year later in early January.

We didn't know anything about sheep when we met Henry and Jonny. I'm sure you two could tell. We couldn't even tell you apart. It's hard to believe it given how distinct your heads and bodies are! But I guess one needs exposure to start noticing, or perhaps to start learning what to look for.



Henry and Jonathan, 2012.

Charlie Dog was sitting in the middle seat between D and me, while the two of you were in the back of Vinnie. By the time we reached home Charlie and Henry had become friends, and remained very close till the end.

I was watching videos this morning of you two playing. It amazes me how smooth the interspecies communication between the two of you was. You were clearly understanding each other's intentions, reading between the lines, so to speak, decoding symbolic gestures – capacities that nonhuman animals are not supposed to have; humans are so full of bullshit, aren't we?

Sometimes you were playing so rough that it was scary: your heads close together, Charlie growling at you with a vicious look on his face, you ready to butt him off the face of the earth. I'd start to get anxious, 'Is this still play?' But you trusted each other fully, and the next thing we know he's licking you affectionately and you're licking him back in a most unsheep-like, dog-like fashion.

Over the last couple of months of his life, Charlie's health deteriorated rapidly, and you were all here witnessing it. I wondered what you saw, what you knew, what you understood, *how* you understood it. What I do know is that you knew he was unwell and that you knew it was serious, and I think you cared.

I know Henry cared. In the last stages Charlie was very weak and he couldn't walk much so I'd often carry him around, remember? One day Charlie was feeling a bit better, Henry noticed it and ran to him. You seemed so happy to have your friend back! You greeted him with a light butt as you would often do in play, but that was too much for poor little Charlie, he was way too weak, and fell over. I think I will always remember that deep sadness and disappointment that I saw on your face:

*My friend IS leaving me.*

Some say that dogs like to be outside when they are ready to die, Charlie didn't. He insisted on going out onto the lawn for a pee and then he

wanted to come into the house. As I was putting you to bed with your hay dinner, Charlie was in his bed with D sitting beside him. Death started knocking.

*Charlie, come on, it's time to go.*

*No, another few minutes, she's on her way.*

*Charlie, we have to go.*

*Just a minute, please. Hurry up, T, I'm leaving.*

I came back, he passed away a couple of minutes later. Even though ultimately we die alone we seem to like having a caring presence around whether we are dog, human, sheep and possibly anyone else.

## 2

Three years ago today, we buried him, wrapped in your wool. This was the first time that I buried someone I truly loved. It didn't feel right to just put him in the hole we'd dug for him under the lemon tree. 'Is he going to be cold?' Of course not, he was dead, but I had to make him cosy anyway. Before that, I took his footprints and a bit of fur to make a little 'Charlie's painting' that is now hanging on the wall above his old feeding spot.





It was a challenging day, in all sorts of ways, including your reaction to his dead body.

I wanted you to know that he was dead. I think people – all sorts of people: human people, sheep people, etc. – have the right to know what happens to their friends. I think it's cruel when people just disappear. I try to imagine living in some place controlled by some creatures who couldn't speak my language, like humans can't speak other animals' languages. As a consequence these creatures might think that I was dumb, like humans think of other animals. They'd think that I was unable to capture certain concepts, such as the concept of death, so they wouldn't even try to help me understand what happened to my family and friends, instead they'd simply make them vanish. I wouldn't like that, and I think other animals don't like it either. It introduces a level of uncertainty into the situation that no animal would be comfortable with.

That's why I brought Charlie's body to you. I wanted you to know. I was holding him in my arms, you came over, looked closely, sniffed him and jumped off. All of you, one by one, did exactly the same thing. I know it was a reaction to his dead body because you'd seen me carrying him around before. Henry and Jonathan often came to say hi to him in my lap and never reacted like this. You smelt death, it must have been the smell.

### 3

I often wonder how much you know. Humans tend to think of ourselves as the 'knowing animal', partly based on our presumably amazing communicative skills, but there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of by the human. A wealth of senses and agencies to speak to them.

Do you remember that rainy morning when I slipped bringing pellets to you? I wrote about this on a couple of occasions, a memorable fall indeed. The pellets spread all over the place. You gathered around me,

and, dutifully ignoring the pellets, you started to sniff in my direction. ‘How are you? How is she?’ you must have been wondering, as I remained on the ground, immobile, waiting for the acute pain in my leg to subside, and wondering myself: ‘How am I? What are you smelling? How much do you know?’ How much *do* you know? And how much do you know that I don’t?

Some of the most intriguing questions tend to emerge when I find myself – accidentally or intentionally – on the ground. The world looks and feels different on that level. You want to stay there, gripped by the weight of evidence, but you may decide against it, get up, step into the garden (or go for a walk in the woods, or down the street in a big city or a small town, take a dip in the ocean or dig further into the earth), and, like a little Doctor Dolittle, find the world is no longer what it used to be; it is alive and speaking – all of it: that slug crawling along the path is leaving a trail that contains meaningful information for the slug-language-literate, that chirping bird is also saying something that is not just ‘chirp-chirp’, the grass is singing her own song, the clouds, the pebbles, the wind, and others – all of them, all of us, with our own voices and messages that are meaningful to us and those who can read us.

#### 4

*This is freaky! What’s this smell?*

*Smoke? But it’s very subtle, maybe there’s a fire far away.*

*What about all these panicky birds suddenly all over the place. Refugees?*

*Do you think she knows that something is not right? Is that why she’s putting the hay into the van?*

*She’s not planning to piss off and leave us here, is she?*

*She’d never do that! I bet the van is for us.*

*Yes, we’ll all go into Vinnie and off Barcarolle!*

*Barca- What?*

*Boat-ing. Offenbach. Beautiful piece. We’ll all be safe in Vinnie swinging down some dirt road, as in a boat, toward lush pasture!*

*Waltzing down the Blue Murray River.*

*Haha! Cox River more likely.*

*I'm not sure about boats but pasture sounds good.*

Did you know about the fires before the smoke arrived? Did you know how close and big they were? And how many animals lost their homes and lives?

Coincidentally, the fires started on the day Charlie passed away. They grew very quickly and they kept growing. When they eventually died, three months later, they had taken with them three billion native nonhuman animals, and many other nonhuman animals that either don't count because they are considered pests, or count as dollars rather than individuals because they are considered stock: live-stock, including sheep.

'If only we spoke the same language,' I often think. In times like this I'm glad we don't because I might tell you things that you probably don't know and that I hope you never find out.

These fires were unprecedented in size and intensity. The size of our national park exceeds 2.5 million acres, and seventy-nine percent of it was fully or partially burnt. We were right in the middle of two mega-fires. The one to the South was burning four kilometres from us, and the one to the North two kilometres from us. For about two months we were ready to evacuate every day. Vinnie was packed with sheep essentials, the car with human essentials, and our evacuation plans kept changing as the fire was moving around and taking more and more areas.

The odd thing was that for several weeks with the fires burning so close to us, we had virtually no smoke. Sydney was engulfed in a thick cloud of smoke all through that time but the wind direction meant they got it all and we none. I wondered if you knew about the fires during those weeks. Could you smell them? Could you tell something was wrong because there were more cockatoos around than normal? There may have been other things that I didn't notice but you may have? 'Gifted

with the extension of the senses we [humans] have lost or never attained, living by voices we shall never hear.' Isn't this passage beautiful? Henry Beston wrote it when he was living alone in a little cottage on a beach.

Anyway, you certainly felt that eeriness in the air that comes with fires and maybe other disasters. Even we, dumb humans, with most of our senses dampened or never developed, can sense that. It's like a choir of all agencies in a particular place vibrating in tune. You can't isolate it through your ears but it's penetrating through every cell.

Then the smoke came to us too, didn't it, and just stayed here. You couldn't remain inside with the doors and windows closed like humans can. And because you couldn't, I didn't feel I could either, in solidarity. It also messed up with my new habit formation plans.

