Amici della Montagna
(friends of the mountains …)

In a forgotten valley on the edge of time, our family stewards a small cottage, a ten-foot-square hut with a window on the world. This window frames a Cold Mountain worthy of Han-shan’s poetic genius while sheltering in the refracted glory of another. Four hundred years the cottage has stood thus, its construction made possible by these selfsame giants – built of the cliffs, once aloft, which crumbled under the tumult of time, split and smoothed by aeons to useable proportions. Stone sentience surrounds us, embraces us; as within, so without. We are (literally, as John Muir believed) in the mountains as they are in us.

Indeed, we cannot help but be conscious of their presence, our minuteness in the face of their majesty. These mountains call to us and, like all high wild places in the world, are open to teaching us their secrets if we – in turn – are open to listen, to observe, to quietly, reverently, contemplate the sheer fact of true nature in action: ‘The secret of the mountains is that the mountains simply exist, as I do myself: the mountains exist simply, which I do not. The mountains have no ‘meaning’, they are meaning; the mountains are’ (Matthiessen 1998, p.95).

In his Mountains and Rivers Sutra, Dogen writes of the high wild as the dwelling place of the great sages, that this in fact has ‘actualised’ their sentience: ‘However many great sages and wise men we suppose have assembled in the mountains, ever since they entered the mountains no one has met a single one of them. There is only the actualisation of the life of the mountains’ (Daido Loori, 2008).

In a forgotten valley on the edge of time, I feel this life; I hear the resonant hum burbling up from far beneath the earth, the ‘actualisation’ which constitutes a connective thread to the very Ground of Being. I hear the mountains’ call, der Ruf der Berge. But how many of us have the opportunity to heed the call, to make the trek into their domain, respectfully sit at the feet of the sages to learn, to befriend the simple fact of their beingness?

I know that some have more opportunity (and proximity) than others. I know that some may have opportunity or proximity but lack intent – having not yet heard the sages whisper. Yet of those who have, some are even honoured with the title: Friend. Amico. And once a friend, a friend for life, a friend who ever-returns, ever-tugged by the unseen hand in a homecoming ritual as worthy as any to bear the name.

Amici della Montagna – friends of the mountains, these ones so-called. Friends who, as sacred task, commit to caretake the landscape within their remit, offering service to the life of the mountains themselves together with all those who wander the high wild with backpacks and stout boots and lungs full of fresh clean air. Amici della Montagna – these are the friends who return over ever over; friends that our family has the privilege to now also call amici following an extraordinary meeting one autumn years past …
Border-crossings 1

Our small cottage nestles in a valley on a border – a border between two countries and two continental plates, the latter’s fluidity and dynamic tension catalytic to the creation of this high wild region. It is also a border where the different dimensions of our one world, the holism that is Gaia – physical and non- – is itself very fluid. The veil seems thinner here, my intertidal zone a becoming landscape which shapeshifts at will. The propensity to border-cross – between here and there, before and after, material and Malakut – thus occurs more often than not, and with it, the teachings of ‘wise men and sages who have all made the mountains their own chambers, their own body and mind’ (ibid.). Over the years, I have found myself a-wander through these inner mountains – traversing tunnels of shed snakeskin, stumbling upon catacombs of sacred relics, discovering the kiln room at their heart, witness to life pulsating in a chalice therein. My lesson each and every journey has been to forge a connection between the mountain at the core of my being (as related in this essay) and the heart of the felt world – my becoming mergent with the density of stone sentience a profound expression of the sanctity of the incarnate, material existence we share.

Such expression involves, amongst other things, my practice of walking the high wild, connecting to spirit of place with each tramping footfall. It is a practice generally engaged in concert with family – each a like-minded soul according to their own mode of being (including our resident canis lupus). The need for perfect weather does not figure highly in the decision to walk. Indeed, given the minuteness of our cottage any opportunity to be out is as literal a godsend as it is figurative. In the spirit of John Muir’s perennial observation that ‘going out (is) really going in’, walking the high wild involves leaving the known, the familiar, the human-dominant; and entering the foreign, the mysterious, the primal. It means shedding our ego’s alpha status, donning in its stead the cloak of humility and awe. We walk in the tracks of wolf, lynx, deer, chamois – this is their salon, and we the polite gentleman callers therein.

Picture, then, a wet and wintry day in mid-autumn. Complement complete, we cross an arbitrary political border to follow our river upstream – a river which, like all others, knows no border but watershed-led gravity. Plunging more than 2000 metres in 30 kilometres on its journey out of the valley, our river is a stunning symbol of Gaian holism I celebrate long and loud in poetic form. To trample the path beside its frothing joy a joy itself which I cannot help but uplift time and again in text.

On this particular day, however, no rhyming couplets graced my thoughts. They were focused on the muddy path ahead, the rain dripping from the brim of my cap, the thick cloud shrouding surrounding peaks as well as most of the valley besides. The sound of sloshing boots and rushing water filled my mind. But all of a sudden, another sound rose above. A distant brushcutter. We looked at each other askance. Who on earth would be out on a day like today working an alpine pasture? My husband shrugged. Probably one of the alp-herders doing some last tidying before winter buries the landscape in snow for the next however-many months, he proposed.

We continued, and presently came upon the source of the sound. As predicted it emanated from the precinct of an alpine hut, its picturesque meadow replete with Madonna shrine, on a terraced slope above the river. We nodded and said hello to the fellow we saw from the track: Buongiorno! And he grinned past his noisy appendage in reply. Not five minutes later, though, we came upon two more cheerful souls. This time my husband stopped for a proper chat, one in which the rest of the family could not participate, the local language being a border we have not yet sufficiently crossed.

Farewells said, the men headed off at a good clip along the track ahead. Our interpreter, meanwhile, turned back and offered the following translation of their conversation: ‘Apparently there’s a mountain hut further on where we can get out of the rain and have a hot coffee. About 20 minutes. They’ll show us the way.’

A public restaurant out here in the middle of nowhere? And at this time of year? Often farmers offer snacks and drinks, even light meals, over the summer months to hikers passing their farmsteads to supplement their meagre income but we had never heard of any in this region. There was cash in the
backpack destined for the bar back in the village where our excursion began for the requisite hot toddy to round off a chilly day out. As far as we knew it was our closest ‘civilisation’ – several kilometres back up the track where the road ended on ‘our’ side of the border. Otherwise, several hours by foot across a high ridge to the south would be required to reach villages in the next valley on ‘their’ side of the demarcation. To our reckoning this was a place completely uncluttered by humanity’s footprint. Bemused, yet up for an adventure, we followed …

Twenty minutes can seem like an age if you have no idea where you are going. Brushcutter-man swiftly overtook us to catch up to his friends; from a side path, another fellow appeared. We crossed a decrepit bridge over boulder-strewn whitewater, and proceeded up a steep track through thick beech forest. Russet leaves not yet fallen to earth delightedly dripped onto our already-drenched headgear, and we stumbled over tree roots lost in the gloom of their mushed brothers. Exploring uncharted territory, that’s how it felt – the dog beside himself with glee at each fresh sniff-of-the-new, I giggling with the inanity of how our day was unfolding. Finally we came out of the trees and beheld a mountain hut up ahead.

Into it went the stream of men – six by now had accumulated along the path ahead of us and from the opposite direction arrived a couple more. These looked at us slightly quizzically before stripping off drenched shirts and trousers and then also disappearing into the hut. My husband’s conversationalist appeared at the door, beckoned us to enter. Including dog? Sure, including dog! It seems we had not been ‘shown’ to a farmhouse restaurant which just happened to be in the neighbourhood, but ‘invited’ to join these men at their own personal fireside.

In we trooped. A single room with an enormous hearth over which was bubbling a veritable cauldron of pasta. A long wooden table, groaning with food, flanked either side by solid oak benches. The entire setting squeezed with sweaty bodies, broad grins and damp towels. Come sit! they cried. Share our fare! Bottles of wine miraculously appeared, handshakes and shy smiles were offered for the language-mutes amongst us, cheese ends and bacon rind conjured for a dog in seventh heaven.

We were warm, we were dry, but what was all this about getting a coffee? my husband laughed after his second glass of red.

His interlocutors chortled in returned. You’ll have to wait till the feast is over and all hunger sated before your coffee shall be served! they winked.

*Amici della Montagna.* On a wet and wintery mid-autumn’s day we had stumbled into their cross-border domain. A medley of individual volunteer organisations throughout the Italian Alps, this particular band of merry men stewarded our *inzwischen* (in-between) zone – clearing paths, erecting signage, putting crosses atop peaks, renovating disused alpine huts as *rifugios* (refuges) from the whims of high wild weather. Hailing from a village in the next valley, their trek in would normally be hours long. Ah, but to do their work with all requisite gear, heli-drops were scheduled throughout the season – April through October – for these caretakers of landscape. Despite the inclemency of this weekend’s weather, its date on the calendar had been etched in stone; the last of the year, it could not be postponed. Wives had packed all manner of delectables for their Big Day Out, and these dozen men – through the sheer delight of sharing – were determined that we too would be stuffed to the gills before any espresso offered to complete the communal breaking of bread.

With wine-loosened tongues, the *Amici* described their singular joy to perform tasks in service to Nature and all who visit her high wild. To be out in the mountains, in the belly of the felt world, was welcome respite from the foibles of the world of men, they confided. Everything seemed more *honest* out here – true nature by another name.

One spoke a little English, shifted closer to me and said: ‘We sing.’

Sing?
It was an opening the other Amici could not ignore. One fellow prodded his neighbour, an action which continued down the whole length of the table until the domino skipped to the other side, pattern repeated. Eventually someone nodded before disappearing up a ladder into the loft, returning a moment later with a piano accordion in mint condition regardless of how many heli-drops it had endured. The remainder of the troop gargled last dregs of wine, tuned up tenor and baritone larynges. My English speaker explained: ‘When we come to the mountains, we like to sing. And over time, we have become quite good. Now we give concerts. Our songs are the peasant songs of old Italy – about love, poverty, migration, and always the longing for our mountain homes. Now we will sing for you.’

During the performance which followed in this private salon, every human emotion possible of being summoned was, and in wonderful choral harmony; more often than not accompanied by table-drumming from the youngest member of our family together with ecstatic sync-barking from the four-legged one. Hours we had spent in their company. Rendered speechless by their gifts, their generosity – of home and hearth, voice and song, the authentic outpourings of souls who bless each and every guest at their fireside – needs be we had to take our leave before our way would be lost to the mists of night. Needs be we had to return to the known world, the one left at the end of the road in a forgotten valley on the edge of time. But not before exchanging addresses. Once an amico in person, always an amico in spirit. From the moment of my husband’s first salutary chat with two of their number on a muddy path, we had been welcomed as honorary members of this community of true friends of the mountains, a revelation no less charming for its heart-felt spontaneity.

Indeed I felt we had been embraced by humanity pure in an uplifting demonstration of incarnational aspiration in this grand Gaian experiment – our sacred task to be an amico to all sentience in creation, to see and act with eyes as clear and unclouded as the Amici della Montagna, who sing in praise of our beautiful world with passion equal to any angelic host.

Border-crossings 2

In the years following our chance meeting, we have not (yet) come across the Amici out in the field again. But that does not mean we do not stay in cyber-touch, or deliver Easter Eggs to their mountain hut’s lintel (rather than the threshold, for obvious reasons), or discover their activity in side valleys we have wandered to chart new territory. Each time we cross the border to walk this particular patch of our valley’s high wild, the Amici fill my thoughts. I walk the path consciously, knowing it is the way it is because of their work; that a section of track demolished by avalanche the previous winter, for example, is only waiting for their careful unpaid hands to arrive the following spring. No shillings jangle in their pockets, their labour their reward, and the fruits of same the evidence before them as surely as love the impetus for its performance. ‘For the love of it’: an offhand expression brimful of meaning in this context; unconditional is their care for the land they call home.

Yet in another border-crossing as momentous as the first, I was to discover that our Amici were not the only ones caring for this land they call home.

One day, about six months later, a chilly day in late spring (frigid, the wind still ice-infused after a winter which did not want to end), we trekked with friends along a well-known path on ‘our’ side of the border till halted by deep snow. Our planned excursion would not be possible. But rather than retrace steps in disappointment, we perused the map before heading cross-country up a south-facing
slope to another ridge. Picking our way between remnant patches of slush, an alternate was proposed – to climb an unnamed peak which seemed, from a distance, to be relatively, for the most part, snow-free. Thus we headed off on a new adventure.

Two-thirds of the way up, however, I cried halt. The snow too deep, my footing too precarious. We had already lost some of the party at the base of the rise – they were keen to make their way back to a ‘real’ mountain hut to dry out soggy boots and partake of hot soup. The boys, meanwhile (dog-inclusive), wanted to go on; I said I would wait on a solitary granite slab, broad as a breaching whale, till they returned and we could all go down together.

Their voices gradually fading, I turned to face the chain of mountains falling away in each direction and intoned a prayer for their safe return. Cells singing with the chi of shared circuitry, I then began a conversation with the mountain sages of place – the ancestors who have actualised the life of these mountains. It was a conversation in the spirit of Hello the House, in the spirit of the thoughts I share in this essay. I told that we come to their mountains because we love. Love the engine of our intent – to come close, closer to the Ground of Being through the inexhaustibly-miraculous, awe-inspiring creation that is our beautiful world. I stood on a giant chunk of ancient living rock, glacier-smoothed and –split, felt its stone sentence connect with mine. Our collective resonant hum was loud and clear, our intercourse soul-to-soul, yet mediated through material selves, these star-dust cloaks we shabbily wear. Oh, but it seems that more was awakened by our communion during that half hour than a simple sharing of the reasons why our family walks the high wild. For once the boys returned and we began our march down the mountain to meet up again with the rest of our legion, I had an intriguing encounter.

Walking a straight line along the ridge, along a non-path or a mountain goat-trampled track (nought more), as usual I pulled up the rear. Concentrating on where to plant my feet, listening to one of the boys try to imitate the sweet melody of a courting bird earlier heard singing from atop a budding larch, I slipped into reverie of the Amici and how even when we did not walk one of their specific paths, I could still somehow sense their ‘presence’ in the subtle bones of the land.

In that moment, it seems I crossed a border without realising for suddenly all sight of my companions faded and I saw two wee folk walking along the non-path toward me. They were only about knee-high tall but 'adult', wearing sturdy green dungarees, and jabbering away to each other in a language I had never heard. As we passed each other, they did not acknowledge my presence. In fact, I don’t think they even noticed me, so deep were they in conversation. I immediately stopped and turned to see where they had gone. No more than an instant but they had disappeared.

In their place words formed: Amici. And I understood that these tiny folk were equally responsible with their human counterparts for keeping the paths safe as well as generally blessing the landscape of which they were stewards. Later I told my husband of the encounter. But rather than being as wide-eyed with wonder and excitement as I, he quite matter-of-factly said: ‘Oh, you must have met the little people. We call them Wildmännli …’
**Wildmännli**

Literally translated as ‘wild folk’, the Swiss have a long and rich oral tradition of *Wildmännli* legends as do other countries in the Alps. And to a story, they all tell about how *Wildmännli* are wonderful helpers to mountain farmers, taking care of their meadows and even herds when they are absent or ill, as well as providing advice for everything from hunting etiquette to pasture management and veterinary remedies. Truly are they *Amici*, ones that by any other name would smell as sweet.

Each now and then, my husband remarked, an old-timer from the mountains would talk about *Wildmännli* with nostalgia, reminiscing about a time far in the past when they had been part of the visible world. Mostly these stories would have been told to said old-timer when he or she a child agog on a grandparent’s knee. But retreat they did, to the hidden, to the invisible, permanently. For many centuries alpine farmers and herdsmen have needs be performed their tasks alone …

My husband could tell me no more. Research took me to the legends themselves; the first collection of direct oral reports documented in a volume from the late 16th century, and extended by two separate authors in the early to mid-19th. As part of a cultural history project for an inner-Swiss canton, a fresh text was fortuitously published containing all known data at the same time as the two tiny *Amici* popped into my field of vision. Saved from the dilemma of poring over old German script and grammar, I could concentrate on content and translation instead.

As [Steinegger](http://www.nestedfishes.org) writes, it was always known that *Wildmännli* lived an existence mostly hidden from humanity. Their very name conjures the spirit of the wildness of nature, the prevailing landscape of the Alps – ‘amoral, one that can never be tamed’ – with its mountains, gorges, valleys and forests, its plentiful caverns and deep holes in the ground which seemingly lead to the centre of the earth. The stories speak of them as ‘neither men nor gods, but frontier-walkers, border-crossers between the demonic and material worlds’ (Steinegger 2013, p.13):

> ‘In the legends, *Wildmännli* are described as little people, silver-haired and beard, about the size of a four-year-old child (or “two shoes tall”), half-naked or completely hairy. In winter they clothe themselves in *tannenbart* (fir-tree lichens), moss, foliage or animal skins. Mostly they go barefoot. Other reports have these diminutive people dressed in a red or green outfit complete with beret. Apparently such clothes were gifts from alp-herds and farmers for their good service’ (ibid.).

Further, what the legends tell is that as humanity expanded its reach into the Alps, *Wildmännli*, ‘expelled’ by the new settlers, ‘fled’ deeper into the mountains, retreating from an ‘invading Christianity’ which had no time for other ways of being than their own. Nevertheless, they remain honoured in the naming of many regional landmarks mapped since the medieval, and their documented great love of music and dance has long been integrated into popular Swiss culture. A continuing alpine ritual is the banishing-of-winter where *Wildmännli*-cloaked mummers (amongst others) form yodelling, bell-ringing troupes to ‘frighten’ the cold and dark away at local *Fasnacht* (Mardi Gras) festivals – one example of an enduring pagan tradition successfully translated to later Christian society.

*Wildmännli*. Dear sweet souls. For many generations had they shyly participated in the life of the human world, their joy to help, to teach, to be true *Amici* to the land and those who peopled it. But increasingly they found only rare companions in spirit, the solitary herdsman on his summer pasture or a busy milk-hand in an alpine dairy: ‘Once a milk-hand who had to stay overnight in the hut rather than return down the mountain to his farm in the valley, woke to find them at work, making cheese in God’s name. Astounded, he took the drink of milk one offered while another said that if he would like to learn to sing or yodel, play the flute or alphorn, they would be happy to teach’ (Steinegger 2013, p.92).

The author notes: ‘For as long as I can remember, I had often heard of the little people being seen, sometimes even in large gatherings. In the far past they were intimate to humanity. But more recently it has become much rarer … old people often explain to me that the *Wildmännli* complained about the
wickedness of the world, that people no longer lived with the simplicity of their fathers, and that for this reason they had retreated from the world’ (Steinegger 2013, p.32-3). Again: ‘Wherever Wildmännli remark anything wrong or ungerade (odd, unbalanced, strange), they leave straight away’ (Steinegger 2013, p.91).

Yet every now and then, the veil between the dimensions thinned invitingly to offer a glimpse: ‘Sometimes people would see them suddenly appear out of a cave or crack in the rocks and just as quickly vanish again, blitzschnell (as fast as lightning) … They would come out to help with the hay. They only need say schwapp and the hay would be mown. … (People knew) they kept chamois like goats, and that if one was a friend to Wildmännli, they would be gifted a wheel of chamois cheese with the proviso to never completely finish it otherwise it could not grow back again’ (Steinegger 2013, p.39-56).

**World-workers united**

The existence, and world-work, of Wildmännli continues, whether we ‘see’ it or not, whether we are aware of it or not. Like all Faerie Folk legends, the Wildmännli of the Alps were once observable fact. They may have gone underground – literally, metaphorically – but they are no less real for being unseen by sceptical human eyes. And, after my delightful encounter, I knew them to be as true a company of friends to Gaia’s high wild as any Amici della Montagna heli-dropped in with brushcutters and piano accordions.

Indeed, after my encounter, I realised I had met my Faerie Amici long before in the Otherworld but had not known them for who they were. I recalled with delight a troupe of little people in joyous celebration at the local churchyard before disappearing beneath a gravestone with cheeky grins. It was a meeting I gave to Kisha as she was ‘surfacing’ from grief and pain to find the peace and tranquillity of inner knowing in their stead (p.425-6):

She watched clouds slow-skid the sky, shape-shifted by silent winds, and spotted a twin-cloud, hands and feet conjoined, a perfect O of blue space at their centre. Never mind the wind which caught them at their task, spreading wide their misted wings. Their yogic stance could not be broken and the O, with its tunnel of clear light beyond, stayed. Even as the sun dipped behind the ridge, the twins caught pink now by dusk, these guardians of the way, stayed right-wrapped round their O. And she waited until they melted into evening blue, wondering: Does the path remain when no longer seen?

She went to bed with the question still on her lips and dreamt of the village from a time before now, from a time of no paths between cottages, only grass and the rare stone marker. Nevertheless she is in the selfsame cottage, knows it to be the same although no Madonna graces her outer wall, although she sleeps on a mat by a crackling hearth.

Suddenly she is called to a celebration at the church and skips down the hill to join a procession through the graveyard. She sees accordion man astride a gravestone of granite, this time with guitar, calling everyone to join their merry troupe. She thinks she recognises others as well, but can’t be sure as they fade in and out of focus. Everyone claps and laughs, sings and cheers. Such a party!

A dark night but the way lit by gentians, precious deep-throated flowers line the path, tiny bulbs filling their blue hearts, skin translucient from an inner glow. Kisha follows the troupe along a twisting turning route while a joyous chorus sings loud in her ear. After a time, she stops, follows no more. At
peace with her decision, she farewells the merry-makers as they move off through a clear-lit tunnel to beyond, shared voice like swirled mist to her ears.

Each time we trek the paths in our forgotten valley on the edge of time, I feel gratitude for the collective service of the Amici twins who make the trail safe and sure-footed for all wayfarers. With each audible step my boots engage their work, whether on the Earth’s outer skin or via her inner subtle bones. And through their work, because of their work, I have the privilege to engage mine – to enjoin the life of the mountains, to engage the wisdom of mountain sages. Their planetary embrace facilitates mine; their conscious holding and flowing of greater Gaian intent – regardless of the size of garden plot they steward – energises my resolve. Holding and flowing such intent, in whatever way, shape or form, serves the whole; each act a firefly spark of hope for a more loving world. Thus each time I walk I send blessings to all Amici stewards, physical and non-, for their selfless expression of love. For their love ensures that those of us drawn to walk the high wild can express our love likewise – in my case to mirror joy back to the face of the sky.

The memory of my various meetings with the Amici makes me smile every time, and has fuelled a small collection of simple but heart-warming touchstones for when I am far from their orbit. Yet since those first encounters years past, we often find ourselves trekking the same paths in our own unique way, connecting at the oddest but most delightfully whimsical junctures. In this respect, my human Amici can pop up as ‘faerie-like’ in nature as their ‘cousins’ can wield a subtle brushcutter.

Still, the initial connection was Amici to Amici, as within, so without, as above, so below. These two ground crews, united as world-workers in sacred task, presented me the possibility to bear witness, to learn. Who knows if they bear witness to each other’s work; it is not a question I have asked nor does it seem important. Important is the fact that I have been fortunate enough to bear witness to how they live the divine grace inherent in our beautiful, beautiful world, how they each sing a precious note in a world-wide, -deep and -high choir, how their joy-inflected symphonic praise generates a resonance of connectivity in, out and all round about Gaia’s interwoven stream of consciousness.

We sing, said my English-speaking Amici friend.

Yes. It is a simple as that. We sing. United. Please join us.