

WHAT MAKES ME HAPPY

By Kuki Gallmann

I moved to Kenya in 1972: almost 50 years dedicated to the protection of Ol Ari Nyiro (The Place of Dark Springs), the vast conservancy on the Highlands of Kenya where I have the privilege and the responsibility to live, and where, below two trees on the rhythm of the horizon, forever rest the human remains of my Husband and of my Son. Their essence surrounds me and inspires me, until the Great Doors will open for me too, and I shall also be part of The Whole. I shall have done my duty.

The land where I live spans as far as the eye can see, through the valleys and slopes, the hills and the mountains, the caves, the savannah and the lakes of the Great Rift Valley, the Cradle of Humankind, as the research carried out by palaeontologists has established. Nothing happens by chance. From here I move rarely because no other place in the world exists that makes me as fulfilled as being here. It is a surreal time on the planet Earth: virtual news of an insidious and incomprehensible epidemic reaches us through electronic systems now familiar to most, but still alien to one brought up to write with a pen – nib dipped in ink – in the countryside of post-war Veneto, where I grew up as a child. I love to live alone, in the open, surrounded by this African nature to which I belong too, feeling part of the Cosmos; to think, and to listen to the silence: a silence full of presences, of secret creatures whose lives unfold following natural rhythms, in an equilibrium that only humans disturb, but not here. I have been their guardian. At that time of day when the sun begins to set below the horizon of the equator, every evening I drive alone to reach a different spot where I park my car and proceed on foot, find a rock and sit on it, to wait and listen to the sounds of silence. The silence has the voice of the wind, of invisible insects, of the frills of wings

and calls of a thousand birds, of trumpeting elephants, of rocks rolling below the hooves of running buffalo; of raindrops on the tangles of bush leaves. Today I have chosen Ngobitu Dam. The lake reflects the ancient hill, the old euphorbias are like hands lifting their long fingers in supplication to the silent clear sky. A new breeze bends the silvery young mutamayo trees. The solitary stork paces the shore next to the nest of the Egyptian geese, hidden amongst papyrus. A family of warthogs trots to their den behind an anthill of red earth. I wait. It is the magic hour when, to the sounds of the day, the sounds of the evening gradually succeed, before the voices of the night take over. When the light changes, and I feel an intrinsic part of The Whole. I listen. In the gathering darkness, the heavy beat of wings of the eagle owl, on his hunt for rodents. Bats circle above, catching imprudent night insects. A sudden grunt: the old hippo surfaces from behind the island. The sound of rolling stones by running hooves announces buffalo, and here they are, black backs crusted with mud, diving as one into the water. With a last scream, the *Upupa* birds go back to their nest dug into the trunk of a large acacia. Not far, a hyena howls, and a leopard coughs behind Kuti Hill. The light of millions of stars unknown twinkle remote in these pure infinite skies, while the shapes of the great animals emerge again from the thickets. A deep breathing, very close. Gurgles of water sipped through long extended trunks: here are the elephants. They can see me, they accept me. I am happy.

Kuki Gallmann (born 1943) is an Italian-born Kenyan national, best-selling author, poet, environmental activist and conservationist. The daughter of Italian climber and writer Cino Boccazzi, in 1972 she moved to Kenya with her husband and son, where they purchased Ol Ari Nyiro, a 98,000-acre cattle ranch in the Great Rift Valley. She later converted the property into the Laikipia Nature Conservancy. Here she set up the Gallmann Memorial Foundation (gallmannkenya.org), which promotes coexistence between people and nature. Gallmann has written five books, published in Italy by Mondadori, that became global best-sellers. The first, her autobiography I Dreamed of Africa, was turned into a film starring Kim Basinger.

