

Fabio Andina, *La Pozza del Felice* (Rubettino, 2018), pp.210.

Working Title: *Felice's Pool*

“What do the inhabitants of today’s complex, technological world, mired in threats, have to learn from an eccentric ninety-year-old who burns dried cow dung in his woodstove and sees a potential ingredient for his vegetable soup in every weed at the side of the road? Felice, a true bon viveur, never presumes to be a prophet. And yet his gnarled self-sufficiency enchants people” (Wolfgang Höbel, *Der Spiegel*, July 4, 2020).

La Pozza del Felice has sold over 25,000 copies and gained critical acclaim in Switzerland and Italy. The book won the prestigious Swiss prize, ‘Terra Nova’ (Fondazione Schiller) for emerging authors as well as the ‘Gambrinus, Giuseppe Mazzotti’ award for mountain literature, an Italian award won in the past by writers of the calibre of Tiziano Terzani e Luis Sepúlveda. The French translation, *Jours à Leontica*, is published by Editions Zoe. After an article in *Der Spiegel*, the German edition of the book (*Tage mit Felice*, Rotpunktverlag) became an overnight success. The Südwest Presse, the Ulm daily, is publishing the novel as a series.

Andina’s next book, with two more in the pipeline, will be published in Italian and German on the same day.

Felice’s Pool has been selected as a recipient of full funding for the English translation by the Swiss Cultural Ministry, Pro Helvetia.

Pro Helvetia has also chosen *Felice’s Pool* to present to the Cannes Festival *Marché du Film* project “Shoot the Book!”

Proposal and Translation Sample:

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At a time when world events and the ongoing pandemic have made us question the complexity of urban life and dream of turning our backs on it, this book offers a way forward.

Felice's Pool is a semi-autobiographical journey of initiation. A young man, the narrator, has fled the chaos of the city to live in the timeless and unspoiled mountains of Leontica, in the Ticino Canton of Switzerland. His encounter with Felice — whose name literally means "happy" — and his decision to shadow the old man for eight days, sets the narrator on a path of discovery, not just about the village and its inhabitants, not just about Felice's secret, but, more importantly, about himself. Andina's style is fast-paced and suspenseful, as if the story were being told out loud around a fire. At the same time, the descriptions of nature in all its myriad manifestations are filled with wonder. Every moment the narrator spends with Felice is savoured, as if the significance of the here and now will melt away as mysteriously as the mist shrouding the mountain peaks if it is not closely scrutinized and preserved in his memory. Andina abhors artifice, relative clauses and semicolons. He captures people's faces and expressions, atavistic relationships within the small community, unfolding events and landscapes with cinematic precision (Andina trained as a screenwriter in San Francisco). More importantly, though, he faithfully transcribes Felice's silences and rare words — "When we die, we all turn into compost, we are all the same, blood is red for everyone, servants and masters" — successfully avoiding the temptation of distilling the concepts or transforming popular wisdom into something as banal as a philosophy of life, even when the novel reaches its tragic climax. Rather than 'on the road', Andina's initiation is set in motion by following the ninety-year-old up a steep mountain path before dawn, and then immersing himself naked, as the old man has just done, in the purifying glacial waters — "a lead-coloured splash against the black rock" — of Felice's pool. When the two men stand on a rock to dry themselves off, gazing down to the valley, the human bond between them is sealed and the adventure begins.

“Readers feel as refreshed as if they themselves had emerged from a rock pool filled with icy water [...] (Wolfgang Hobel, Der Spiegel, July 4, 2020,

Translated Sample (approved by the author) of pages 5-19.

It's him knocking, waking me up. It's not even half past five. I go downstairs to open the door and see him standing barefoot in the dark, holding an umbrella, in shorts and an open shirt. A blast of cold air and rain. I get dressed and go out. The thermometer Vittorina gave me is hanging on a nail outside. Low forties. Not even that cold, I say to myself. It must be because I'm not used to getting up that early.

I ran into Felice yesterday outside my hut. It was a beautiful afternoon. The first grey clouds, which would go on to darken the sky before nightfall, were beginning to shroud the mountain peaks. I was priming the door of the woodshed when he passed by, wearing the same clothes, still barefoot, carrying a plastic bag full of persimmons. We exchanged a few words and that was when I asked if I could shadow him for a few days. To live as he lives for a while.

We take the three stone steps and stride into the rainy mist that envelops us as we follow the narrow, pebbled path that winds between the huts. Huts as ancient and imposing as the stones they are made of. Roof beams curved under the weight of limestone tiles, slits of windows still silent. The sporadic street lamps provided by the city council shed a little light onto the path.

Rumour in the village has it that Felice sets off every morning long before the roosters are awake, walks to an icy rock pool only the devil knows where, and jumps in as naked as a worm. Some say he's always done it. Others say he started after his trip to Russia in the Seventies. Others again claim he only took to it after he retired. The pool must be somewhere along the Gurundin mountain stream, some say. No, on the Altaniga torrent, somewhere between the Celso and the Tognola family farms, others argue. Over five thousand feet up at the top of the Gualdo Alp, still others contend.

Leaving the village behind us, we take the main road that goes from Leontica up to Nara. Felice's feet slap against the asphalt and Vittorina's mule in the paddock just ahead of us is braying.

By the time we reach the fence, the mule is there waiting for Felice to pat him. I do the same, taking my time. His hair is rough and wet, his winter coat already growing thick. The rain is drumming on the sheet-metal roof of the stall.

We walk on. Felice, dressed for summer, leans his umbrella over to cover me. We reach and go past Floro and his cat Rasta's place. A hovel, almost invisible in the dark, which he fixed up as well as he could twenty years back. Sheets of fibre cement for a roof, no mains electricity, water running through a hosepipe from the stream, the nearby ash groves for his toilet. It is barely habitable. The windows are still dark. Floro is still asleep. On we go.

Floro once told me that all the stories about Felice and the pool were a pack of lies. Yes, it was true, he said, that he wandered around like a stray wolf. Years before, when he still could, he would run up and down the mountain. It's the only sport that doesn't require anything, he used to say. He would start running, Floro went on, but very often he himself didn't know where he was going. Like the time they'd seen him with a bag in his hands at nine in the evening up at Cancori, near that restaurant called Genzianella. He'd claimed he was picking wild asparagus.

We leave the main road at the Old Larch turnoff, marked by a solitary tree that has been there forever, and take a short-cut up a dirt track heading up to Sella. Sella is a half-mile square of flat, terraced land at the top of the village, under the steep slopes of the Selvaccio pine forest. On one side, the deep gorge carved out by the Gurundin. On the other, the switchbacks of the road to Nara. A terrace with pastureland, a couple of cattle sheds and two or three mountain huts for holidaymakers. You can just see the stalls belonging to the farmer, Sosto, in the distance. A spotlight shining on the façade guides us to the entrance.

They say that in the winter Felice has to break the ice that forms over the pool and that he takes along a bar of soap to wash with. Someday he'll end up as stiff as a board in those frozen depths. And who will ever find him? He'll be eaten by the foxes.

Sosto, forty-five years old, built like a peasant, unkempt hair and beard, the stub of a Parisienne in his mouth, is tinkering with the milking machine, grunting and cursing all the while because the tubes are blocked and aren't sucking properly. We say goodbye and set off again.

It is still almost completely dark and we walk on, listening to the squelching of our feet in the mud. Yellow light from a street lamp illuminates the wooden foot bridge across the Altaniga torrent. I wonder where the rock pool is, whether we'll follow the stream. Instead, we stay on the track.

Further on, there's another wooden bridge over the fast-running water of the Gurundin, which we cross. Here, the track comes to an end, widening so that cars can turn around. The feeble light from the last street lamp is reflected in the dark, quivering puddles. Before us, the dark pine-forest.

Felice closes his umbrella, cuts to the right, and vanishes as if he's been swallowed by the shadows. I start to follow him but, after a few steps, I come to a halt with a jolt. I can't see a thing. I wait for my eyes to get used to the dark. Nothing. I hold my breath and cock my ears. I can hear him a few feet in front of me. At least I'm out of the rain.

We are slowly climbing up a steep, slippery path that I can't see. I try and picture it in my mind. I step carefully, my hiking boots horizontal to the path and knees high to avoid stumbling on a loose stone, a spruce root, or anything else, holding my hands out in front of me so that a loose branch doesn't poke me in the eye. Felice, I call out.

Oy, he answers, his voice rising out of the darkness.

Nothing, I just called to know where you are. These are the first words we have spoken to one another. We climb a little further and then he says careful not to go arse over tit, almost whispering, maybe out of respect for the silence that reigns in the pine-forest,

Like almost all the inhabitants of Leontica, Felice only speaks the dialect of the Blenio Valley, also known as the Sun Valley.

Felice, I call out again, whispering like him.

Oy.

Don't you have a torch?

A torch? Eh, I suppose I have a torch, somewhere or other.

I reckon we have been climbing for a quarter of an hour or so when I hear a sudden crack, like a branch snapping, followed by the thumping sound of heavy steps moving away quickly. I come to a halt, startled. Deer? I ask.

Aye. Could well be. Lots of deer here. His voice reassures me. We carry on climbing. I manage to keep up with him by listening to his breath and the soft crunch of his steps.

A few minutes later I can just make out his mud-splattered hamstrings a few feet ahead of me. The dense canopy over our heads is beginning to thin out. Who knows what time it is? Dawn must be on its way, I tell myself. I hear a distant chime, then another, and another. The Leontica bells are ringing in the six-thirty Ave Maria. A clear, joyful tune. He stops and looks back down at the valley, standing there, rapt, until the last notes, suspended mid-air, slowly fade away for good.

Once we are out of the pine-forest, the path begins to flatten and Felice speeds up. We stride through a myriad of dark blueberry, mountain rose, and perhaps even alpine azalea shrubs. In this light they all look the same. Here and there clumps of dwarf pines form shadowy cut-outs, an occasional solitary spruce towering over them. It's still raining and the raw,

relentless wind stings my face. My nose is running and I wipe it with the cold, wet sleeve of my sweater. The rest of my body has warmed up.

The path under my feet has become more visible now. A furrow one-span deep and three wide. Like the grooves carved by cattle at high pasture. I can hear the Gurundin burbling to my right but I can't see it. I do a quick mental calculation and realize we must be nearly five thousand feet up. But I'm not sure, because I can't get my bearings and I've lost my sense of time. I don't wear a watch and I left my mobile at home. Who would be calling me at this time anyway? Felice doesn't have a watch, either. He's right there ahead of me, barefoot and dressed lightly — considering how cold it is — in loose cut-off jeans and a short-sleeved, open flannel shirt, holding an umbrella over his head.

Last September, Felice turned ninety.

Accompanied by the babbling of the brook to our right, every step brings me closer to being able to gauge shapes and distances. The clouds are lifting and the black silhouettes of the mountains stand out against the sky, which is just, just beginning to brighten.

Finally, after an interminable period of silence, Felice says *bòn* and stops. I stop, too, and catch my breath. That's when I see it.

A lead-coloured splash against the black rock.

The pool.

He strips. In the darkness his skin seems to shine. No underpants. He hangs his shorts and shirt on a spruce branch nearby and, without a second's hesitation, dives right in, head and all, as naked as a worm, exactly as people have always described it. I stand there holding my breath, scared that the slightest movement might distract me from the here and now.

He's fully immersed, just his nose sticking out of the water. Which puffs steam. I move under the spruce to get out of the rain, even though I'm already soaked. I can feel the cold begin

to bite at my shoulders and shivers run through my body. I flap my arms against my sides, rub my hands together and stamp my feet. I wait.

He rises up out of the water, climbs out of the pool, opens up his umbrella against the rain, and stands on a stone, completely still, staring at the white dots of the street lamps down in the valley. He's looking away from me. So, I look over at the dark rock pool. I ask myself why I would even contemplate it. I'm freezing, it's raining, it's dark. But I asked for this. I tear my clothes off and jump into the water with a dive of sorts, yelling something or other, I don't know what. And I scrape my knee on the rocky bottom.

I'd like to hold my nose out of the water as he'd done but I can't do it. It's too cold. With one leap I'm back out and by his side. He lifts his umbrella a little and moves it over. We stand there, naked, in silence, letting the wind dry our skin.

The sky is opening up. It's beginning to stop raining and behind Mt. Simano, the day is breaking, heralding a new morning. Once we are dry, we put our clothes back on and start walking again.

Billows of cloud waft up from the valley and float there, scratching their bellies against the tips of the fir trees. Then the clouds catch up with us, wrapping themselves, cold and wet, around our bodies, caressing them, until our visibility is reduced to ten or twelve feet at the most. Up here, on a mountain, you can get lost in mist like this. Or you can feel even more alone.

Felice snaps off the tender tip of a branch from a dwarf pine that appears out of nowhere. He sticks it in his mouth, chewing but not swallowing, as if it were a cigarette. The mist moves on, the clouds lift, and a ray of sun hits us, lighting up the whole valley.

Agile and absorbed, we walk back down the dirt track from the turnaround, flanked on both sides by rows of bare ash and chestnut trees. There are gaping gashes in the ash trunks where deer have nibbled at the bark over past hungry winters. We stay out of the deep furrows

left by the tractor tyres. Some of our footprints from an hour or so ago are still partly visible, others reabsorbed by the mud. The meadows all around us are glistening with moisture and the air smells fresh.

Before going into the stall, Felice spits out a gob of green. The chewed dwarf-pine bud. The milking machine is working at full throttle now and Sosto is standing by the vats checking the milk levels.

Hey, worker, Felice calls out to him, and the farmer answers hey, without lifting his eyes from the counter.

I greet him, too. Hey, Sosto. He turns around and scrutinizes me with his beady eyes. I'm about to say something, that the rock pool does exist, that it's up past the Selvaccia pine forest, along the Gurundin, but Felice looks at me intensely, his eyes full of reserve. *Bòn*, he says, cutting me off. Let's go.

See you then.

Ciao Sosto.

Ciao then.

His Haflinger van is parked outside the stall, with a trailer attached to transport the milk vats. No registration plates. His Dad, poor old Anselmo, bought it more than ten years ago at a Swiss-Army auction in Thun. We keep walking, almost marching, down to the village. I bang my heels on the asphalt to clean the mud off my walking boots. Felice's bare feet are bathed clean by the wet grass on the verge.

It looks like Floro is still sleeping. Nothing is moving, not even the chimney fan. The shack and its sloppily-built stall are now clearly visible. Sprouting up among four holiday chalets, shutters closed, satellite dishes on newly-tiled rooves with identical limestone lozenges, tidy stacks of chestnut wood and lean-tos for their cars. For the umpteenth time, I think to myself that Floro's hovel is really the black sheep of Leontica.

The mule steaming in the pungent air trots towards us once again so that we can pet him. We give him what he wants. Puffs of stinking steam come out of his nostrils.

When we get back to the village, he goes into his farmhouse to fetch some wood and I slip back home to change into something dry and then go back to his place. When I get there, he's sitting on a chair, legs crossed, staring at a crack in the plaster on the wall. I don't say a word. I grab a chair, bring it to the bare table and sit down. The Rayburn stove is on. The wood is crackling and the room is warm.

The water in the pan boils over, which makes him get up. He takes a pinch of dry herbs out of a cardboard box and sprinkles them into the boiling water. He opens a drawer in the dresser, sticks his hand inside, and pulls out a bar of chocolate. From another drawer he extracts some bread wrapped up in newspaper, unrolls the paper and spreads it out on the table. Then he takes some roasted chestnuts out of another cardboard box and puts them on the sheet of newspaper. He opens a window and takes a glass jar of yoghurt from the sill, which he places in front of me. He pours the steaming-hot infusion into a mug, says *bòn* and sits down opposite me. In no time at all, he's made me breakfast. A tisane of dry herbs, hazelnut yoghurt, dark chocolate and a handful of roast chestnuts, cold and as hard as rocks. The infusion is bitter but it warms me up in an instant, sending away the shivers that were still jolting through my body. As he pours me another cupful, he adds a small log to the stove, checks the temperature on the flue gauge, and goes out leaving the door open behind him.

The sky is cloudless and the wind has calmed down. The tepid sun is now suspended a span above the peak of Mt. Simano. I pull up the sleeves of my sweater and settle comfortably on the granite bench to the right of the front door. We both sit there, as immobile and silent as two lizards. Our backs leaning against the stone wall of the hut.

A veil of mist down in the valley conceals the villages of Dongio, Acquarossa and Lottigna. Behind us we can hear the primary-school teacher Sabina's dog barking, while

another dog further away responds. Today, again, the house martins are circling and chirping over our heads. Hundreds and hundreds of them. They are gathering into colonies preparing to migrate. Guided by an invisible hand, they perch along the electricity cables and then take off as one, brush against the limestone roof-lozenges and return to the high wires. Recently, they've been leaving later and later. Global warming has reached Leontica, after all.

Felice is sitting on the bench to the left, his head turned up to the sun with his eyes closed. His ancient face is scored by the passing seasons, his arms are robust and the soles of his feet as calloused and rough-skinned as the bark of the Old Larch. Maybe because he feels my eyes on him, he moves his lips and says the cold is coming, as if he were thinking out loud. I look away. The snow's just around the corner, I hear him say, winter's here. I gaze out at the grey peak of Mt. Simano, then back at the flight patterns of the martins with their shrill calls, and finally my eyes come to rest on his garden. The cottage garden is well tended, with square beds in straight lines, healthy leaves on the vegetables, rich well-aired earth with a smell of mulch. Lettuce, radishes, leeks, potatoes, onions, garlic, parsley, celery, chard, rosemary, sage, lavender, mint, thyme, mallow. Birch and beech trellises ready for the summer beans. I once gave him a bag of seeds and he grew so many beans that he had to go around the village giving them away in a paint bucket. The compost is piled up against the wall. In the left-hand corner, an old pear tree leans towards the valley. A few pears dangle there at the top. In the right-hand corner, a persimmon tree is so laden with fruit that its branches almost touch the ground. I get up and pick one. I sink my teeth into its soft flesh, hoping not to drip the juice all over me.

Do you want anything from the garden? he asks me, moving nothing but his mouth.

I can see part of my house from where I am standing. The front door, and the door of the woodshed, the roof-tiles, the chimney. It used to be the village dairy. They made cheese and butter there, in the old days before the war. After the war, it was just a milk deposit. All

the milk from the villagers' cows ended up there in a huge cooling drum, but they kept on calling it the dairy anyway. Even now that I'm living there.

Emilio told me that, back in the day, there were cows everywhere in Leontica, with cattle sheds all over. Beyond the square. Under the graveyard. Behind the bar. On the way up to Nara, in Pian di Sella and further away in Negrentino. Everywhere. Even people who were not farmers by trade had a cow or two behind their house to milk. And pigs to fatten. And sheep and goats and rabbits and hens. From September to June, when the cows weren't up at high pasture, there were more than two thousand pints of milk coming into the dairy per day. Two thousand. Emilio worked there for a long time. From the end of the Fifties to the beginning of the Seventies, he transported milk from Leontica to Biasca. A little truck. There and back. Twice a day. Until the roof of the dairy practically collapsed and my parents bought it as a holiday home. Felice was the one who did it up when I was a boy. Now it's a magnificent mountain hut. I've been living in it for a year, escaping from the city.

They moved the milk deposit to where it is now, a ground-floor storeroom in the municipal council building. More modern, more hygienic. Ticks all the boxes for the regulations. An isothermal eight-thousand-pint refrigerating tank in stainless steel. A cistern truck used to come from Biasca two or three times a week to empty it. Now it only comes on Mondays, and just for Sosto's milk. Having lost his job, Emilio sold his vehicle and made do until he got his pension by helping Felice restructure huts and stalls, rebuild stone walls and repair limestone-tile rooves.

Felice was a builder all his life, working all the way along the Blenio Valley. One of his last jobs was the roof of the old wash-house right in front of his own home. Water runs through the taps all year round, even in the winter. It never freezes. Every now and again, someone uses it to wash those bedcovers that are too big to fit into the washing machine. When

I was a kid, along with the other village children, we used to block the drain and make a pool out of it just for fun.

No, I answer, gazing over the vegetable garden again. I don't need anything. If I do, I'll ask.

He takes a deep breath and says let's go as he pulls himself upright. He takes a few steps and starts airing the soil of the leek bed with a bare hand, as if it were a rake. Precise and methodical, he goes from left to right and makes a little circle around every seedling. Before getting up again, he picks up a handful of earth and compresses it in his closed fist. When he opens his hand, he observes the dark, damp, dense little ball, smells it and then crumbles it back into the ground. Finally, he pulls up a weed. The only one I can see. The cottage garden is well kept, for sure. He picks a couple of twigs of rosemary and goes into the house, only to come straight out again with the sheet of newspaper in one hand and the pan in the other. He heads straight for the compost and throws the chestnut shells and the herbs from the infusion onto it. Then he goes back in. A second later, I join him, closing the door behind me.

He's chopping the rosemary at the table, on an old board with a knife that has been worn thin by being sharpened who knows how many times? I sit and watch him. He drops the chopped rosemary into a pan, which is almost completely filled with water, and adds a pinch of salt. There you go, not too much, salt is not so good for you, he thinks out loud. He puts the pan on the cool side of the Rayburn stove, wipes the knife down, rinses the board in the sink, fetches a sorghum broom from behind the door and sweeps the limestone flagstones clean. Then he says let's go and walks out.

Emilio is in the vegetable garden. He's eighty-eight and distinguished looking, and he's wandering around with a lettuce leaf in his hand, staring down at the ground as if he were

looking for something. Felice examines him with interest and says good morning quite coldly and Emilio says *bè*, let me find one at least.

Felice sets off. I follow him. To the right of his hut there's a barn where he stores his firewood and parks his car. An old blue Suzuki that's so compact he can drive up the pebbled path between the huts and get out onto the main road at the corner of my house.

We climb into the Suzuki and fasten our seatbelts. Felice puts the key into the ignition and turns it to the starter position. With one hand on the steering wheel, and the other on the handbrake, he looks over at me and says can you push? I unclick my belt and clamber out. Felice releases the handbrake and the car slowly rolls backwards out of the barn. Leaning heavily on the car, I help him turn it in the right direction and, with a further push from me to get up speed, he puts the car into first gear and tricks the engine. I glance back one last time at Emilio, who still seems to be looking for something in the vegetable garden, and then jump back into the car and we drive off. I wonder where we are heading. I let myself be transported.

We drive less than a thousand feet and park in the square. A cyclist is filling his bottle at the water fountain. Sweaty and red in the face, he's just cycled up from the valley. Two miles of switch-backs carved into the mountainside. Outside the Gallo Cedrone Bar, two or three farmers are sitting with a glass of red in one hand and a cigarette in the other. We say hello to them, and walk into Marietto's little shop.

Marietto is nearly fifty and lives down in Corzoneso with his Mum, Giacinta, who is widowed, bed-ridden and nearly eighty. He's always worked in the shop that Evelino, his poor old Dad, had opened. Marietto is a little slow on the uptake. He trusts no one and hardly ever speaks. If he's slicing ham, he won't say a word. Moreover, his reputation for being slow has branded him forever.

The brass bell on the door rings, announcing our arrival. A couple of tourists from Lucerne, who are staying in a chalet over the chairlift carpark, have asked him to make them

sandwiches. The man is a non-descript forty-year-old in hiking boots with a mountain rucksack. The woman is a curvy blond with long legs and a nice-looking backside. Marietto pretends he hasn't seen us come in and keeps his watery eyes on the slicing machine, at least the right eye. The left is staring at the Swiss-German woman's *derrière*. Felice places his shopping on the counter. Chocolate, yoghurt, bread, matches, and a bar of soap. He waits. The ham sandwiches are taking too long to make, so he takes twenty francs from the pocket of his shorts, puts the bill next to the cash register, and out we go, the bell rattling against the door.

He's parked the Suzuki on a slight slope. Seat belts, key, clutch, second gear, release the handbrake, pick up speed, lift the clutch, and the engine starts. We leave Leontica behind us and start descending into the valley. But after a few hairpin bends, Felice pulls the Suzuki over, turns the engine off, yanks the handbrake, and gets out. Along the river bed, which has been dry forever, there are some centuries-old chestnut trees. I follow him with my eyes as he goes over to the first tree, pulls a plastic bag out of his pocket, and starts collecting chestnuts, careful not to step on the prickly burrs with his bare feet. I get out of the car to help him. I pick up a handful. I inspect them. They are small. Too small, I say to myself.

The ones here are the thin ones. They come later than the others. They are late chestnuts these ones, he says. As if he's been reading my thoughts.