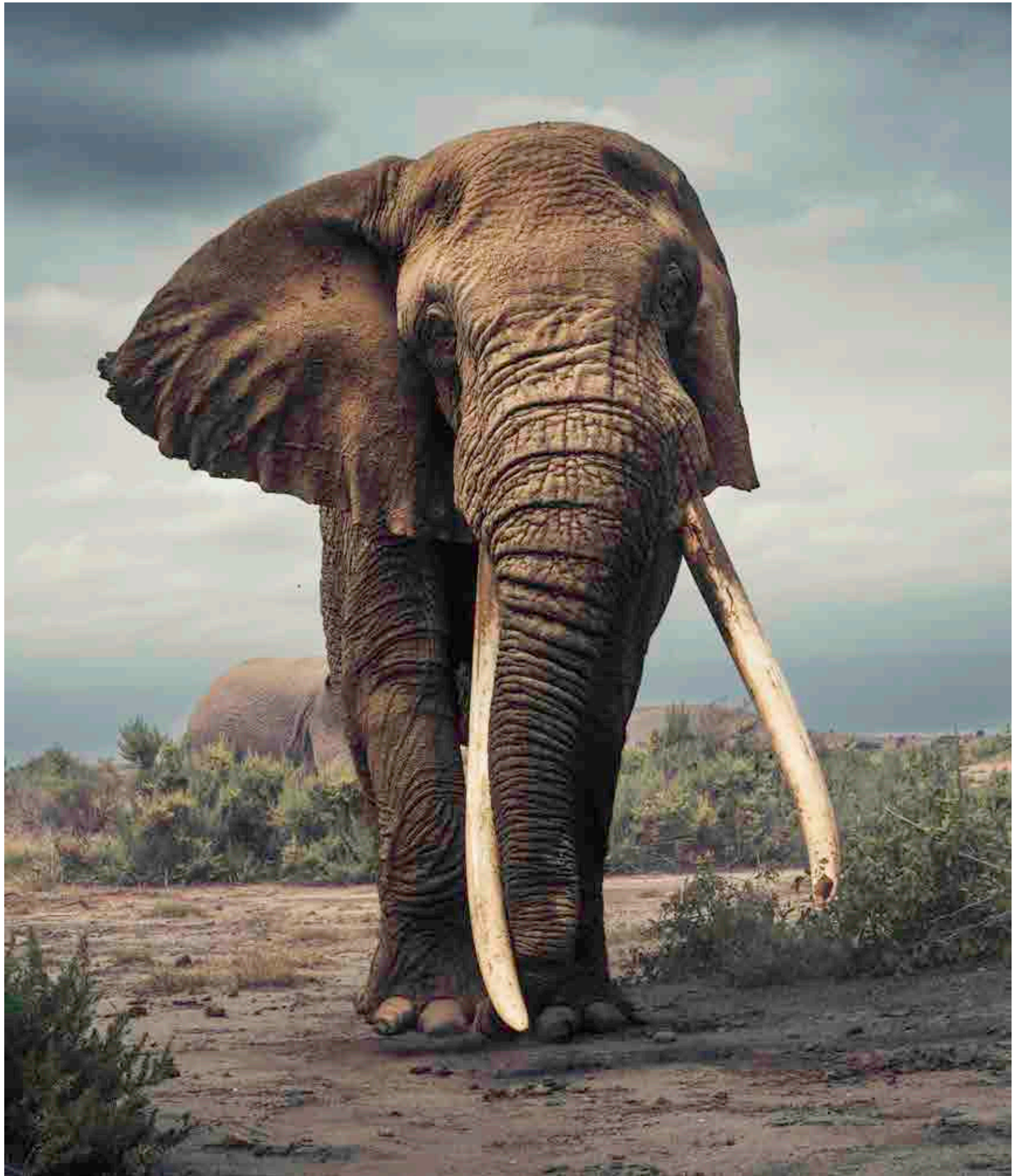


WALK THE EARTH FEDERICO VERONESI

PRESTEL

MUNICH • LONDON • NEW YORK



x004, Amboseli, 2023

For Laura and Giulio

THE SOUL OF UNTAMED WILDERNESS

One afternoon in late August 2023 I am parking on the banks of a dry river surrounded by luxurious vegetation in a remote corner of the Tsavo ecosystem in Kenya. I am watching a couple of young bull elephants digging water out of a hole in the sandy riverbed. The wind rustling the leaves of the doum palms is a pleasant lullaby and also takes my scent away from the elephants. They are very skittish and should they smell my presence, they would certainly flee into the safety of the forest. I wonder whether I would be able to photograph the elephant I have come here to look for if I ever see him: probably the greatest tusker alive at the moment, only known from occasional sightings of him from aerial patrols by a few rangers or researchers. His name is Balguda. Since I started spending a lot of time looking for elephants and great tuskers in particular, photographing him has been my ultimate dream and aspiration. I have looked for him everywhere through the past few years, waiting along rivers, waterholes, driving through forests and open savannahs, all in vain.

My mood keeps shifting between a sense of defeat and refusal to surrender. The chance that he may come to drink exactly where I am and when I am there, is so low that it's depressing.

The elephants below me keep digging and pushing each other to try to get a chance to stick their trunk into the hole, sometimes trumpeting in distress. And my mind wanders off remembering the encounters with the magnificent tuskers that I was lucky to meet along this journey. Remembering the peaceful moments I spent watching the elephants in otherworldly sceneries, sometimes in a surreal silence under dramatic cloudy skies crossed by rays of light.

My passion for elephants dates back to when I was a very small child in Italy, always dreaming of the African wilderness and drawing wildlife-filled savannah scenes. The great pachyderms fascinated me the most; they were the protagonists of every drawing I made. I collected postcards, figures, books featuring them. Of all the stories I read, one that particularly struck me was that of the legendary Ahmed, the great tusker from Marsabit National Park in northern Kenya. He was such an iconic creature that Kenya's first president, Jomo Kenyatta, issued a presidential decree to have him protected 24/7 by armed rangers. Ahmed died of old age in 1974. During my first safari in Kenya with my parents in 1982, I visited Ahmed's reconstruction and skeleton in the Nairobi Natural History Museum—one of the moments that I remember most



Oneton, Chyulu Hills, 2022



Craig, Amboseli, 2022

fondly from that life-changing trip, and probably the moment when the foundations of this book were laid.

Great tuskers are rare and charismatic individual elephants with very long and heavy tusks sometimes reaching to the ground. By convention, tuskers are considered elephants with tusks weighing at least forty-five kilograms, but the tusks of the greatest tuskers may also reach sixty kilograms each. Elephants' tusks keep growing throughout their lives, particularly in the last ten or fifteen years. But not all elephants become tuskers with age, as there is a strong genetic component in the shape and size of the tusks.

Having long tusks for an elephant is an evolutionary advantage. Males with long tusks are often dominant and favored by females for mating, while females use their tusks to defend themselves and their calves from predators and to debark trees during the dry season.

Unfortunately, elephants have been hunted for their ivory for hundreds of years and the ones carrying the largest tusks have been specifically targeted both by trophy hunters and poachers. This has progressively reduced the average length of tusks in most populations and the distribution of the gene associated with long tusks. Space for them is also shrinking dramatically in a continent with an exploding human population, leading to conflicts that invariably end up with the elephants on the losing end.

Great tuskers in Africa are now only found in very few areas within the elephants' range, and the majority are concentrated in southern Kenya in Amboseli, Chyulu Hills, and Tsavo West and East. It is here where I focused most of my efforts to find them and photograph them.

The journey was filled with exhilarating encounters. Some were brief and fleeting. Others were prolonged encounters and repeated in time with the most easily accessible individuals, such as the legendary tuskers from Amboseli, Tim, Craig, and Tolstoy.

The endless immensity of Tsavo has been the hardest to come to terms with. At times I climbed on top of a rocky outcrop to scan with binoculars through thousands of square kilometers of thick bushes stretching

out in all directions around me. How could I find one specific elephant in this endlessness? Then I would always shut these thoughts off, get back into the vehicle, and drive on, try again, and again. And I was fortunately rewarded with unforgettable encounters, such as with Dida, Lugard, or Ittilal.

While driving around I often wondered what draws me to searching for these great tuskers and what keeps me pushing so hard on such a low-return photographic endeavor. There have been weeks where I have hardly touched my camera at all. Or trips from which I came home only with very mediocre images of faraway shy elephants. Then a great tusker would emerge from the bushes, heading to the water in the mid-day heat with his tusks glimmering in the sun, and all would make sense. All the efforts became worthwhile. And my heart would beat faster, my hands would shake, especially in those situations when I knew I had very little time to capture his or her majesty and beauty, before it disappeared into the bushes or before nightfall.

The tuskers evoke an aura of majesty, strength, intelligence, wisdom, calm, eternity. They are the last witnesses of a world before humans took over the earth. The last guardians of Africa's wild spirit, embodying the soul of the untamed wilderness. Many of them are mysterious creatures, who are rarely, if ever, seen at all. In a world of growing civilization, burgeoning human population, and shrinking spaces for wildlife, knowing that an unknown great tusker might still hide in a remote valley of Kenya gives me hope for the resilience of nature and hope for the future of all wildlife. And for our own future.

Now the evening wind is slowing down and the elephants that were drinking before have disappeared, returned to the forest. The riverbed is empty, except for a few Impalas taking advantage of the holes dug by the elephants. Another day has gone by without finding Balguda. After a few days of trying, I am starting to lose hope. I have no idea if I am anywhere close to him, if I am in the right area at all. Or if he is drinking at night under the cover of darkness. As I drive slowly back to camp with the last glow of sunlight from the west in front of me, I think to myself that if I ever get to see and photograph Balguda, it would be the culmination of this quest, and the time to tell the story of this journey. And the story of the last great tuskers who still walk the earth.

TIM
FEBRUARY 2010

The rains are back in Amboseli after a terribly dry year. The elephant cows are returning into estrus more or less at the same time, as soon as conditions improve. The plains that were bare and dusty up to two months ago are now covered by a layer of lush green grass.

A big herd of elephants is slowly emerging from the woodlands, heading to the marsh. Behind them I notice a big bull, his enormous forehead towering above all the others. As soon as he steps out completely, I realize I am watching the greatest tusker I have ever seen. His right tusk almost reaches the ground, the left just slightly shorter. While I watch him walk with Mount Kilimanjaro behind him, I have the clear feeling of being in the presence of a special creature, a true heir of the mighty Ahmed. I am witnessing an iconic scene which I'll carry with me forever. Tim is in musth and appears interested in a female who is probably in heat. She escapes the attentions of every other male and seeks comfort next to Tim. One nod of his giant head is enough to make the other males back off and become submissive. The first great tusker of my life, the beginning of this journey.

