

Wilderness House Literary Review 15/4

*Translated by Peter Sean Woltemade
from the original in Danish by Thomas Boberg*
Monkeys and Horses

"WHAT MAKES THE MONA LISA DIFFERENT from so many other Renaissance paintings?"

It's Sicily who asks this question so cleverly. We've met him and his girlfriend Autumn in the city, and we agree on an outing to the countryside.

"Why should the Mona Lisa be anything special at all? After all, there's a painting of a similar subject from Sicily, a much better picture, far more complex and mysterious, and the painter is even unknown." He smiles conspiratorially, triumphantly.

"On Sicily," he says, "there's a volcano that's still active. It's Etna—do you know Etna? Oh, Etna, and then there's a giant forest, a primeval forest on Sicily, deep and enchanting." Sicily, Sicily, the forests on Sicily, and the horses in the forests, the wild boars in the forests, the Mafia on Sicily that's completely invisible, it exists but doesn't exist, it's as though Sicily is proud of the Sicilian Mafia, or just that the world-spanning Mafia in fact has its roots on Sicily, oh, and Sicily's life as a horse-breaker and tourist guide, the horses, yes, the fishing quotas for the Mediterranean and again the horses but in particular incredible Sicily. His gaze disappears into itself, into fantastic Sicily, where he led tourists on horseback over the jagged peaks, around bellowing volcanoes, and down through amazing primeval forests that exist only on Sicily.

Sicily has traveled the world a great deal, but whenever a guide has led him to one of the supposed wonders, he has found that it is in no way comparable to the wonders there are on Sicily. Sicily, the island of his birth.

"An Italian? No, I'm not from Italy, I'm from Sicily." There's only one place in the world that could be compared to Sicily to a certain extent, and that's Colombia. Everything there is in Sicily is in Colombia, too. In Colombia it's just bigger, yes, even the Mafia is bigger, but it's not as original, there's more of it, he has to admit that, but of course everything is nevertheless better, more original, on Sicily, even the birds.



The price depends on the person who is speaking. There's no security; the guides are untrustworthy, full of tall tales and tricks; the deal we've just made with a taxi driver is worthless.

This miserable country suffers from mood swings. Outright fraud. Sicily complains.

Oh, yes, the gods and the guides can't be counted on.

We get into the beat-up car, Autumn on the front seat, Rebecca and I on the back seat. Next to Autumn sits an old man who speaks English better than the driver. Sicily, the last person to get into the car, reluctantly sits on the back seat next to Rebecca.

Soon Sicily revives, he gets his cell phone out and begins to give Rebecca a lecture on Sicily. She has to follow along with his slide show because, well, why? Because she's been raised well, because she's one of the people of good will, because she can't get away, because she's sitting next to him, that is, pressed up against him, in fact she's practically sitting on Sicily's lap. There has to be a limit somewhere. She tries to interrupt Sicily, but he's on autopilot now, he can't stop anymore. Sicily is so big and beautiful and all Sicily's horses trot through the moonlit Sicilian landscapes of the Sicilian night.

Autumn has been on Sicily with Sicily for a whole year, and this trip they're taking together is a farewell trip. Autumn is supposed to go back to the United States, where she works with horses as Sicily does on Sicily. The horses, it was the horses that brought them together. "Oh," said Sicily, "they really treat horses badly in Ethiopia. It's horrible here for horses."

"Isn't it sad to go on a farewell journey like this?" I asked.

"Well, it isn't certain we won't see each other again," said Autumn.

The taxi, which was in its forty-fifth year, rolled down the road toward Koreney. The big wild land, so empty and populated at the same time; black deserts; the migrations of peoples; the early childhood of the human race preserved in fragments of bones I had seen at the museum in Addis. Real bones, fake bones. But the cellar holds the bones of some of the roots of the human race, *Australopithecus afarensis*, Lucy or Dinkinesh, which means "you are marvelous," and Selam, who died at the age of three and is three point three million years old, one hundred fifty thousand years older than Lucy, the beginning I could sense on the horizon, palely flickering, dust, sunbeam, darkness, forgetting, and these splinters of bones, a jaw here, a thigh there, a rib, a skull, and everything the human being never knows, like the beginning that moves in time and geography, gradually, as new fragments are discovered.

The way human beings are here. Part of the surface of the earth. At the edge of the cliff are not stones but children looking out. A car from the seventies bumping over dirt clods, holes, stones, dust. We haven't yet seen a cloud in the blue, burning sky of Ethiopia.



We get out in Koreney. The women and children of the village run toward us, shouting. The driver buys a bag of bonbons for fifty birr. We'll have to pay for these, says the driver, and pass them out to the children, no, to everyone, that's part of the price for getting to Koreney, a village of stone. Some of the houses are a thousand years old. That's what they look like, as though they had come into existence outside of time, up on the heights. You can see a long way on all sides—this is an old strategic placement—and there is a little mosque. One of the young mothers, pretty, flirtatious, child on her arm, wants me to photograph her. Wants me to pay her *now*. Soon I'm surrounded, and suddenly, they're standing there with all my things in their hands, my notebook, my sunglasses, my hat, etc. I give her a ballpoint pen and win my things back; she's the bold one with blue beads on her forehead. It's as if we're being pressed against the wall of one of the houses by the entire population of the little village.

"There are stone houses like this in Sicily, too," says Sicily drily.

I'm already inside one of the houses. I've been pushed in here. It costs one hundred birr to stand in this room. I can see an old lady upstairs sitting next to a pile of seeds, hay, grass. Another woman is babbling away. She looks like a whole century. Money, money, I give her some money, and then she motions with her hand, like this, meaning, it's time to leave now. "And now get the fuck out of here" — well, that's not what she says but rather "Go with God."

The rust-spotted blue-white Peugeot stands ready for us to get in. We roll on toward the Elephant Sanctuary. Autumn is allowed to drive — she's a woman, but it's all right because she's an American. The mood is lively, for sure — high, pretty much happy. The moments that occur, stretched moments of satisfaction, freedom, they really do exist. Then it stops, and everything falls into a mental darkness that lays itself over everything, a heaviness in the blood.



Half the country is sleeping on the streets. There isn't enough bread; there isn't even enough water for the elephants. We barrel along to catch up with the elephants, but the elephants have wandered far in their search for water. The sanctuary is empty, a buzzard, two buzzards, clod-covered steppe, otherwise nothing. Well, there is someone here. A guard in a booth tells us, with something like a desperate smile, that the elephants have wandered all the way to Somaliland. We could therefore turn around. Sicily nods, there are no elephants, there aren't any on Sicily either. But what about that Stone Valley we've heard about? Couldn't we just drive there instead? Stone Valley, near the town of Babilie, or, as it's also called, the Valley of Marvels? We negotiate. Rebecca tries with two hundred birr. Sicily's not interested, he wants to go back to the hotel, it's too expensive, and also, Sicily is much better.

I act decisively. Four hundred, okay, four hundred birr for a trip to Stone Valley.

The Valley of Marvels. On both sides of the road, mighty stone formations rise up, hundred-meter-tall stone towers like a giant fortification. We admire a particularly tall stone tower that looks like a giant erect phallus.

A happy landscape.

The driver laughs greasily, loudly.

The old guy smiles too.

Loud shouts from one of the rows of stone towers.

Apparently, they are inhabited. You have to cross a plateau covered with thorny bushes and sharp rocks to get there. You can see them in the distance; they sit there barking and making noise, the monkeys on the tops of the cliffs, on the sides and the ledges, the big baboons hopping and jumping, shouting in the abrupt landscape. Rebecca, who is behind me, looks up at the thorny bushes. We struggle onward toward the cliffs, and now we can clearly see the big baboons. Then we turn around and walk back with scratched arms and thighs. Now there is a sun that has turned

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red, and the cliffs are red like the sun bleeding out its ruby light over everything.



In the darkness, the road leading into the village glows with pulsating light, the light from countless bars and taverns. You don't see those at all during the daylight hours, but now there's a firmament of dim red lights outside small rooms that in the darkness have suddenly become visible. I go into one of the first bars. I'm utterly tired of the company. I want to drink a few beers before everything closes down. I hop over the homeless, the numerous bundles of slumbering human beings. Masses of young girls in headscarves are drifting around. Why? They're looking for the more or less well-dressed men who are also drifting from bar to bar. The night is a great bordello.

The others follow me. Rebecca is right behind me; Autumn and Sicily show up. He takes up a position at the door. He stands there and doesn't want to come all the way in. Autumn is all the way up at the bar; she buys herself an Amber beer and starts drinking it.

"Are you drinking?" she asks me. "And you, Rebecca?"

Now two more beers are standing there. Sicily watches this with an extinguished gaze. He sees what's going on, that Autumn is buying us beers, that she's drinking herself, that she's throwing money around. Autumn orders four beers, eight, ten beers, then she grabs them and distributes them on the tables. The girls flock around her, the whores in the headscarves, astoundingly young; they accept beer; they stretch out their hands for more beer. They laugh and chat and drink. Sicily stands at the door opening watching it all. His gaze is a collapse. The rumor of free drinks has spread with lightning speed. Men and women stream in, the place is now completely packed. Autumn keeps buying beer for people until there is no more money and all the drinks have finally been drunk. Then they walk together, Autumn and Sicily, hand in hand into the night.



In the morning, hung over, I stagger into the courtyard garden. Sicily is sitting on a chair in the courtyard garden near the door to their room. This is when I realize that we're staying at the same place. I hadn't guessed that. In front of him lies a large pile of khat twigs. He chews and chews. He lifts his gaze to me. His bushy black eyebrows have grown together in a bridge over the deep groove that runs vertically down from his forehead and hits the root of his nose.

"It's working," he says. The pupils of his dark eyes are completely open.

We're packing our things, we're leaving. Autumn appears, groggy with sleep, she shakes her head a little.

"He's been sitting there chewing khat most of the night," she says, "since we got back from the bar. You can't get him to stop at all."

She bends down and kisses him on the forehead.