Mt. Etna Chapter
"A Marvellous Wonder to see, and A Marvel Even to Hear About When Men Are Present"
(Pindar, Greek poet, 5th Century BCE)

Douglas Kenning
10 August 2009

One spring day out in the limestone ravines of southeastern Sicily, I walked with Pamela, a dear friend, who for years has been my host and companion on weekly sojourns into the countryside. We can walk comfortably in two of Sicily's three seasons (Rain and Wildflower), but not through the third (Furnace). On this Wildflower day, we strolled along a farm track in a shallow valley. The land around us heaved in rocky discomfort in that awkward antique way of Sicily. The hard-scrabble fields rose to a low ridge below a cloudless sky: stark white boulders strewn in fields indifferently plowed, tufts of grass interspersed with pale-yellow clematis, Red Valerian waving in front of dry-stone walls of pitted grayish limestone. The song of skylarks bubbled somewhere above, invisible spirits of the air; a cuckoo countered mournfully from the valley of tree-squared fields.

Suddenly, something alarming caught the corner of my eye and I felt a flash of apocalyptic fear. I looked to the right, above where the ground rose to a low ridge— where the sky moments before had been the clearest sun-washed blue—towered a mushroom cloud. Its grey-black trunk soared above the horizon and the dirty white crown expanded as we stared. The birdsong stopped, as Nature seemed to hold her breath in the thick morning heat. The mushroom cloud ascended silently, reaching halfway to noon.

Etna never lets us forget her. She glowers over the entire eastern half of the island; as one travels the country, she appears suddenly around the bend of a road or looms at the fringes of vision at odd moments. In the summer, she looks over our shoulders, ready to admonish, admonishment being the role of the Italian matriarch. On Etna, winter, the season of Rain, is the season of Snow, and the mountain seems more like Sicily's grumpy

Grandfather, for when the snow has lain for a while, it looks like a fringe of white hair, with a black bald dome above. "Aetna" comes from the Greek "to burn", which is accurate enough, but not very personal; the Arabs in their two centuries of occupation called it *Jebel Utlama*, "excellent mountain", more respectful but not much more personal. This evolved into the alternative name today, *Mongibello*, "beautiful mountain": like a woman, beautiful; like a woman, dangerous. More colloquially, in Sicilian, she is *a' muntagna*, simply "the mountain", and the noun is feminine. Etna changes gender in this essay, seeming to me either our Matriarch or our Grandfather depending on his/her/its mood. I can be flippant about it, but for those cowering in Etna's shadow, the excellent mountain's moodiness is to be taken very seriously

Etna is Europe's largest volcano. Nearly twice as tall as anything else in Sicily, her height fluctuates around 3340 meters (nearly 11,000 feet), and she seems more impressive than even taller mountains since the eye measures her straight out of the sea. She stands in splendid isolation, about one hundred forty kilometers circumference at the base. With such a hulking monster in our midst, it's not comforting to have geologists tell us that she is the world's most active major volcano, and that she has been unusually active over the last twelve thousand years. She blows steam continuously, sends lava flowing a few times each year, and every few years makes a grand Sicilian gesture—a shrug? a flick of the fingers to the chin?—worthy of international news. Pamela and I had seen the opening salvo of the memorable 2002 eruption.

The entire mountain is a Nature Park, administered by Sicily Region. Efforts at environmental protection in Europe encounter one fundamental problem not faced in the New World, the Americas. Nearly every square centimeter of Europe has been occupied, owned, and exploited for thousands of years, so almost no European wilderness exists (south of central Finland). Therefore, a government seeking to make a completely protected natural area would have to run farmers from the land of their ancestors and depopulate towns, none of which is possible or desirable. For this reason, the land within European national parks and

other protected areas is almost all privately owned. There are twenty-one towns within the fifty-nine thousand hectares (500 km2) of Etna Nature Park. Up to the tree line, most of the park is used for farmland, tree plantations, or grazing. Italy has a strong environmentalist lobby and there are associations working to protect the character of the mountain and the Nature that lives on her, but the best that environmentalists can hope for is that the inhabitants agree to certain environmentally friendly practices. The park divides into four land use zones, but even the most restrictive, Zone A, permits grazing, tree cutting, and most recreational activities, such as hiking, downhill and cross-country skiing, and 4WD motor vehicles (on-designated tracks only). Regretfully, although the law attempts to limit serious disturbance of the wildlife, given the Italian sense of laissez-faire about rules, especially among Sicilians, these laws are ignored by anyone who feels inconvenienced by them.

As much as she is a phenomenon and force of nature, Etna is a character in the story of Western man. The mountain enters our story almost at the beginning, a consequence of Gaia, the Earth herself. Angry that her children, the Titans, had been overthrown by her grandchildren, the Gods, Gaia created the Giants—great men with legs like serpents—to defeat the Gods. In the ensuing battle, the gods, with the help of demigod Heracles (see the chapter on the Roman Villa at Piazza Armerina) did them in. So Gaia tried again. She seduced Tartarus, the Underworld, and gave birth to Typhon, described here by the 2nd century Greek historian, Apollodorus:

> [I]n size and strength he surpassed all the offspring of Earth. As far as the thighs he was of human shape and of such prodigious bulk that he out-topped all the mountains, and his head often brushed the stars. One of his hands reached out to the west and the other to the east, and from them projected a hundred dragons' heads. From the thighs downward he had huge coils of vipers, which when drawn out, reached to his very head and emitted a loud hissing. His body was all winged, and unkempt hair streamed on the wind from his head and cheeks; and fire flashed from his eyes. Such and so great was Typhon when, hurling kindled

> rocks, he made for the very heaven with hissings and shouts, spouting a great jet of fire from his mouth.

When the gods saw that roaring toward them, they fled to Egypt to hide, transforming themselves into animals. Saving the world was left to Zeus, who stung Typhon from a distance with thunderbolts, pursued him as far as Mount Casius, which overhangs Syria, and then struck him down with an iron sickle. But Typhon turned on Zeus, twined about him in a deadly grip, and used the sickle to cut out Zeus' sinews. He carried Zeus on his shoulders through the sea to Cilicia, now in southern Turkey, and dumped him in a cave. He hid Zeus' sinews in a bearskin and set a dragon to guard them. However, Hermês and Aegipan snuck into the cave, put the dragon to sleep, and stole the sinews. They sewed Zeus back together and he arose stronger than ever. Driving a chariot of winged horses, Zeus pursued Typhon to the middle of the Mediterranean and slammed an enormous chunk of earth on top of him, trapping Typhon forever. Thus was Sicily born, and born of violence. Typhon's restless struggles underground account for the shaking of this earthquake-prone island, and the fiery blasts from his angry mouth are the jets of fire from Etna. And, in the closing words of Apollodorus' text, "So much for that subject."

The earliest Mesopotamian civilizations saw all matter as part of the sentient universe. Not only after it is shaped into objects, but matter itself makes conscious choice (as flint chooses to spark, but clay chooses not to), and they addressed things around them through prayer (for example, a prayer to salt). The Greeks, on the other hand, had a proto-scientific belief that matter—rock, mountain, air—was inert. They saw divinity instead in the forces that moved matter, and personified them. For example, earthquakes are expressions of Poseidon or Typhon, control of the winds is assigned to King Aeolus in his palace in the Aeolian Islands in the north of Sicily. Etna's fires are Typhon's rages or, in later Greek story, sparks and smoke from the forge of Hephaestus, ironworker of the gods, assisted by a community of Cyclops. As metallurgy was the central technological feat of the ancient Greeks, Hephaestus represents all technology, and certainly, if you think about it, transforming rock (what we

call metallic ore) into tools and weapons is magic worthy of the gods.

In the late Roman Empire, as the rest of the Western World moved toward monotheism, the people of Etna returned the more primitive sense that matter itself was sentient, and saw the mountain itself as divine. By making Etna itself a god they could try to control the mountain directly—without having to deal through a divine intermediary—the way people sought to influence any other god: request favors, seek its good will, calm its anger. Pausanias, a Greek traveler in the AD 170s, whose Description of Greece is a great resource for historians, describes how the locals consulted the wisdom of the mountain:

> [T]hey lower into them [the craters of Aetna] objects of gold and silver and also all kinds of victims [animal sacrifices]. If the fire receives and consumes them, they rejoice at the appearance of a good sign, but if it casts up what has been thrown in, they think misfortune will befall the man to whom this happens. [3.23.8-9]

Pausanias also shows how divine Etna protects her own—how she acts like the Sicilian she is—showing a Sicilian affection for family and respect for parents.

> . . . the men of old held their parents in the greatest respect, as we may infer, among other instances, from those in Catana called the Pious, who, when the fire flowed down on Catana from Aetna, held of no account gold or silver, but when they fled took up, one his mother and another his father. As they struggled on, the fire rushed up and caught them in the flames. Not even so would they put down their parents, and it is said that the stream of lava divided itself in two, and the fire passed on, doing no hurt to either young men or their parents. [10.28]

As a Sicilian American, I understand Etna's care for family, and the mountain herself feels to me like an ancestor, like family. I climbed Etna first on my first visit to Sicily, my return to the homeland of my grandparents. Perhaps I was looking for an ancestral

connection, both genealogical and spiritual, perhaps seeking an emotional rooting on this mountain, someplace to anchor affection and respect. My maternal grandmother came from Belpasso, high on the south slope, and my grandfather was born in Riposto, a coastal town in the eastern shadow of the mountain. Like most Sicilians, they held intense family loyalty as they emigrated, and inspirited this in their children. My grandfather died long before I was born, but I grew up with my grandmother living with us—both grandmothers in fact, plus my parents, my two brothers, me, and a cocker spaniel—in a small house in Virginia. Grandma was herself a kindly mountain to a little boy, as she kneaded cookie dough or worked magic with tomatoes and oregano, showering words of chiding love upon me in a Sicilian-thick English. Because of the immense presence of the volcano in her youth, even to her having been named in reference to it, I now feel that I also grew up in the shadow of Etna, a fainter shadow than hers had been, a shadow reflected, but still with Etna somehow present in me. I am sure I have been drawn to Etna as to an unappreciated ancestor, an ancestor my grandmother had known as a girl. Yet I do not recall thinking consciously that way on the first visit. I was still a young man, trapped as the young are in a box of themselves. I just wanted to climb the mountain. I knew that Etna was King (or was it Queen?) of Sicily, and I was simply, the way young men are, determined to prove myself against her (him).

This was my first visit to Sicily, only a few days into the New Year, in the season of Rain. On those days when the rains pause, the air breathes cleanly and life takes on a much-appreciated clarity unknown in the heavy and long summer. Under grey skies, early white almond blossoms begin to fluff up the hillsides and orchards shine with forest-green leaves holding aloft an abundance of new oranges. Sicilians say that you shouldn't bother to eat an orange before St. Lucia Day (13 Dec). To me, it seems this old tradition was based as much on the comfort, the secure happiness, of living in harmony with the seasons, the dignity of waiting, the respect for nature's fullest gesture of color and abundance, the need to have the approval of the goddess, as it was based on the date oranges first reached their

peak of flavor.

I had taken the ferry from Malta, which in those days stopped in Siracusa. As we rounded the headland of ancient Plemmyrium to enter the Siracusa harbor, the white-fringed, black mass of Etna peeked over the horizon to the north. Throughout my days of wandering through the sights of Siracusa, Etna was ever peering over the horizon; she was not going to let me forget her. Finally, postponing the confrontation no longer, I took a bus to the village of Zafferana, part way up Etna's eastern slope. I planned to climb to the central crater; from Zafferana it was a circuitous hike of something under twenty kilometers and a gain of over 2700 meters (just under 9000 feet). I suspected that there were trails above where paved roads stopped, but the snow covered them. I saw no reason to worry; a volcano like Etna has few or no sheer cliffs or even difficult scrambles, so no climbing equipment was needed. The regular rain of ash and flow of lava finds a relatively consistent angle of repose and creates an easily climbable graded slope. (My wife doesn't quite trust me on this point.) I knew Emperor Hadrian made it to the top in the 120s AD. He probably was followed by an army of slaves carrying his bed, in case he needed a nap, a dozen pairs of replacement boots, and coolers of beer, while I traveled alone with only a change of socks in my shoulder bag. Still, I felt we were fellow travelers: Hadrian like me used any excuse simply to be on the move, driven by curiosity, taunted by horizons.

I stepped off up the road. Zafferana, a summer resort town, usually is half deserted in the rainy season. The black pumice rivers I saw everywhere were obviously recent, evidence of how often a lava flow threatens this town. Zafferana occasionally makes the news when Etna gets boisterous on this side, and a few years after this visit, in 1991-92, it made world news as both the Italian and US military were called to slow the lava and save the town. Zafferana was silent on this evening, and I remember no sound from Etna when I started the ascent. Snow had laid a soft hand on the mountain, even at a low elevation, turning the slopes above Zafferana into a tranquil Chinese painting of white streaks on black pumice. My left knee complained, stiffening in the chill air, as I ascended. The road twisted back and

forth, higher and higher, and the breath of the snowfields blew cold. It was late afternoon in the rest of the Mediterranean, but on Etna's eastern side, the sun had set a few hours before. Behind me, the shadow of the mountain lay on the sea, a triangle shadow whose point touched the horizon.

The road climbed out of the black and white landscape, leveled off in a pinewoods, then warily skirted the peak to the north side. Tree species changed gradually: olive and citrus groves end at five hundred meters elevation; then come vines for Etna's fine wineries up to a thousand meters; pears, apples, hazelnuts, and Etna's famous pistachios are cultivated to sixteen-hundred feet; and above that Nature takes over. At these heights, the climax species should be oaks—Cork and Holm Oak. These days, however, well-organized conifer plantations dominate these zones. Spanish chestnuts as well have shouldered the natives aside, crowding and overhanging the roads. In the autumn, from out of the dense foliage of long-serrated leaves, hang clusters of spiky balls, as if the trees were roosts for green sea urchins. Among the natives that survive are beech—Etna holds the European record for highest elevation for a beech (2250 m)—and a native birch that is a relic of the last ice age.

Nature in Sicily has been on the run for thousands of years, the tillable land around Etna crowds with towns, farms, plantations, and now recreational construction. I knew that bear, boar, otter, wolf, moufflon, chamois, and deer of any sort long ago had been eradicated. I've seen foxes up here, hanging out at dumpsters, yawning at passing buses of tourists, but the wildcat stays out of sight. I watched and listened for wildlife as I walked; winter is often the best season for seeing animals, those not migrated or hibernating. It was night, when weasels and martens would be about, and hedgehogs, though perhaps it was too cold. In the daylight tomorrow, I would see both rabbits and mountain hares, in fact, since hunting is banned here and most predators killed, off, the hares are getting out of hand. In summer, lucky hikers can come across dormice giving tea parties.

Following the road, I climbed toward evening, and owls began to call from the pinewoods. Bats spun crazily overhead. Occasionally, wide gaps opened where the trees had been clear-

cut for timber, and over the clearing the shadowed shape of the peak suddenly strode into view, black and silver. Above, Etna's plume was backlit in gold by the last rays of the sun. It followed me all evening, that peak, intense black overlaid with silver, darkly glittering. I was aware of a bright-coin moon and of a subtle sense of danger. I began to hear a sound like distant artillery, again and again, booms of thunder from the old man. He was talking to me, and that made Etna seem a companion, a conscious presence. He seemed to be warning me off, but the volatile sounds only drew me closer, pulling me up my ancestor's back. And somehow this made my hike more intimate and the solitude more magnificent.

In the quiet, I now sensed that I had been drawn here to understand something, something Sicilians know instinctively, that each person's several selves overlap—genealogical (family), geographical (the toughness and pessimism of Sicily herself that all Sicilians carry within), and spiritual (the more ethereal urges of the heart)—even, in the most traditional of Sicilians, become one. I climbed steadily upwards. The moon seemed poised forever over that cone, attached by a silver thread, with the delicate balance of a Japanese woodblock print. The three of us—mountain, moon, and me—imperceptibly shifted our triangle, and so I marked my progress toward the north side.

I had wanted to do the whole hike in the dark, to indulge myself in the stunning beauty of the night, and to reach the summit, like Hadrian did, in time to watch the sun rise over the world. But I've never been much good at planning any further ahead than to the next bend in the road, so when I had circled around to the north flank, I realized that to strike out for the summit now would put me up there five or six hours before sunrise. Did I want to spend the night up there waiting for Eos, the Dawn, while freezing to death? Well, that too would be an adventure, but, my cold feet had cold feet and the map pointed me downhill toward lodging. I descended on the road down the north side in the direction of Linguaglossa, and in an hour or so arrived at a *rifugio*, a climber's inn. I pounded and pounded at the door. After a long while, a scowling face pressed against the door pane. Go away, he gestured, we are closed. I didn't go away; I had nowhere to go away to. When he saw me preparing to

sleep on the porch, he opened the door. The opportunity for a Sicilian to be generous often overrules the rules (even if he is not happy about it). He waved vaguely toward the hall: take any room, any bunk; it was just the two of us.

At dawn, the proprietor informed me that there was no food, everything was closed, and I should continue downhill. He was strangely insistent that I not climb the mountain, but I bristled at his caution. In most cases, I have found conventional wisdom often is based on fears of statistically unlikely dangers I simply don't share, so I tend to be skeptical of such warnings. Both of us were Sicilian. Sicilians can be notorious scofflaws when the law seems an unwelcome nanny, disrespectful of a person's adult judgment of dangers (rules of the road, for example). What is very Sicilian also, however, is a hypocritical I-know-best pushiness when the subject is the health and safety of someone else, especially clueless foreigners, stranieri. Beware the Sicilian who has decided you need his help; you could be helped to death. And if you refuse the help, he might just be hurt to the point of tears. They can be an annoying and beautiful people whose social relations are sustained by continual negotiation and a delicate balance impossible for the outsider to get right. The proprietor wrung his hands at the naïve and obtuse *straniero*.

Maybe I was being an idiot, since the mountain was active. But I know that smoke and steam rolls continually out of the central craters at the highest summit of Etna, but never columns of lava. So fissured and fractured is the interior of the mountain that lava diverts into any one of a thousand subterranean cracks and bursts forth on the flanks of the mountain, what are called lateral eruptions. Even then, you are at risk only if standing near that spot just as it happens; rivers of lava most often flow like thick pudding, as often as not slower than a walking pace (yes, and sometimes a running pace).

I bristled that he should look at my ratty old Scottish pullover and US Army Vietnam-era swamp boots and deduce that I lacked mountain expertise. Unfortunately, my Italian was not up to reassuring him that I had learned mountaineering skills with the US Army in Kansas. All I could offer was a Sicilian shrug, and as the proprietor waved his arms in

frustration, pointing downhill, I backed away uphill. Nodding politely, smiling, agreeing with him that the mountain could not be ascended, I turned and ascended.

My map was somewhat indecisive on the subject of trails. Since that time, I have learned that paths wide enough for four-wheel-drive vehicles ascend and ring the mountain, coming within several hundred meters of the summit. However, today, the New Year's snow covered them all. So as soon as the paved road ended at Piano Provenzana, I just trekked up the slope. My plan was to keep climbing until everything around me pointed downhill. Then I'd be at the top. Seemed simple.

Simple, but not easy. Imagine trying to climb a sand dune of pumice grains, each step uphill sliding back two-thirds of a step downhill. When I reached snow and ice, I found that they actually were an aid to climbing, firming the scree, and I broke the ice crust with my boot to make each foothold. This too was tiring, giving plenty of motivation to stop frequently and take in the scenery. The sky made me squint, with that kind of shimmering cerulean blue it can have at high altitudes. To my left, the Mediterranean Sea spread far to the east, where Eos, the Dawn, ascended with me as I climbed. Far above, the crater boomed warnings, its thunder echoing from the westward slopes. Danger, it said, stay away. I zigzagged up, under the towers of an abandoned ski lift, half-melted by flowing lava into frozen dance poses. I climbed toward rusted shacks at the top of the lift, suddenly was slogging past them, and when next I turned they were far below. By 2600 meters, there was no evidence of humans and I felt time dissipate. I had ascended into Etna's single unchanging stillness, and I could imagine myself in any era, imagine myself contemporary with the ancients and their gods.

The Greek poet Pindar came to Sicily to write flattering odes to vain tyrants. It paid well. He was the earliest writer to describe an eruption of Etna, and apparently the first eruption recorded also was one of the most violent ever. In his First Pythian Ode, written in about 470 BC, he begins with Typhon:

> . . . enemy of the gods, Typhon with his hundred heads. . . the pillar of the sky holds him down, snow-covered Aetna, year-round nurse of bitter frost, from whose inmost caves belch forth the purest streams of unapproachable fire. In the daytime her rivers roll out a fiery flood of smoke, while in the darkness of night the crimson flame hurls rocks down to the deep plain of the sea with a crashing roar. That monster shoots up the most terrible jets of fire; it is a marvellous wonder to see, and a marvel even to hear about when men are present. Such a creature is bound beneath the dark and leafy heights of Aetna and beneath the plain, and his bed scratches and goads the whole length of his back stretched out against it. Grant that we may be pleasing to you, Zeus, you who frequent this mountain. . .

Pindar is exaggerating, which is a habit one might acquire to keep the king's ear. Not only is Etna not a "year-round nurse of bitter frost", the weather at the very top can be damned hot in summer. Nonetheless, on the north face, the winter snow packs into the crevices and ash covers it like a blanket, and so it remains all year. On one midsummer climb, in sweltering desert-like heat, I looked up at smooth dark slopes; coming closer, I found white snow under the black insulation of grainy ash, banks of snow many meters thick.

Of course, Christians, like pagans, see devilment where there is ash and fire. The locals used to say that the soul of Elizabeth I, Queen of England, resides in Etna, due to a deal she did with Satan. This story was told in the period of Spanish rule here (fourteenth to eighteenth century) to explain the defeat of the Spanish Armada. Elizabeth surely made a pact with Satan for him to conjure up the storm that smashed the otherwise invincible Armada. This is a more credible reason than superior English seamanship. In any case, on her death, as Satan came for her soul, Elizabeth requested that she be buried not in cold damp England, but where she could survey the Mediterranean, a place she longed to have visited. He obliged and carried her in full royal regalia into the fiery crater.

I was now well above tree line, which brings me to quarrel again with Pindar, this time

about “leafy heights”. The leafiness had in fact ceased abruptly about a thousand meters ago, at about two thousand meters (about 6000 feet). This is very low for a tree line in a hot climate. From high on her slopes, Etna seems one huge black lifeless dune of pumice, on whose flanks pop up multiple black cones. In a typical lateral eruption, a fissure opens; fire and ash shoot skyward; magma flows out and down the slope as lava, while the cinders and chunks fall back to form a cone. The lava then cools and hardens, sealing the mouth of the cone like blood coagulating in a wound. From a distance, Etna shows a bumpy profile, like a bad case of acne, and she’s been called a fertile mother of many little volcanoes. So it is the mountain herself and her scorched-earth attitude, not humans, that wipes these slopes clean of most life.

But not all. There are, as I have said, a series of identified zones of vegetation banding the mountain vertically as you climb, but also, above the tree line, the plant life on Etna falls into sequential vegetative stages horizontally, that is, across time. Lichen and algae are the first to venture onto the cooled lava, both of which do not need nutrients but only a place to set up home. Lichen, in fact, quietly dissolves the rock it paints itself across. Then comes Sicilian milk vetch, Etna French Sorrel, and the almost inevitable (in rocky places) Scotch broom. The highest 1500 meters of Etna seem pretty bleak. But look again. In addition to lichen, vetch, and sorrel, there are two daisies up here—the Etna chamomile and ragwort—that reach within a few hundred meters of the top. Almost as high are Etna violet, pink dots on the black lava. This study of the dynamics of the plant world is of interest not only to botanists and ecologists, but the understanding gained of how life re-colonizes ground made sterile by disaster will help us predict how Nature will recover from us, after we have driven ourselves extinct. I am not sure if that was a joke, but high on the mountain one tends to hear Typhon’s sardonic laugh.

The barrenness, the lack of trees, the post-Apocalyptic, other-planetary solitude made me feel like an astronaut, looking down on great landforms. All around spread unreal views of northern Sicily. On the left, to the east, lies the Ionian Sea, stretching toward Greece—I

can almost see ancient Greek triremes far out there like black dots. On my right, to the north I look across the Madonie Mountains, then the Tyrrhenian Sea, where the grey-brown humps of the Aeolian Islands bob like a row of fishing buoys. (I trust Homer when he tells us they float.) Behind, I look down on the Nebrodi Mountains, an extremely rumpled grey blanket laid on the great triangle point of Sicily, where the converging coastlines touch above Messina. The sense of being impossibly high is dizzying.

I kept going. My lungs felt tight and I began to concentrate just on breathing. Then, inexplicably at first, the crunching of ice under my boots ebbed away to the crunch of brittle rock. The ice and snow were gone. Strange, ice should not diminish as you climb. Before long, my sweater was hanging from my belt. This was odd: January at ten thousand feet, and perspiration dripped from my forehead, streaking down my glasses; my feet began to sweat in my boots. Then I saw steam rise from cracks in the thin, black crust. My boot broke through and released a blast of heat. Within the cracks, I could see down to where rocks glowed orange, like slowly smoldering coals.

With a start I realized the reason for Grandfather Etna's bald pate: I was walking on a fresh lava field. Hmm. Like a man having discovered himself in the middle of a minefield, I paused to reconsider the situation. At least I would not have frozen to death had I come up here last night. Now I understood the warnings by the *rifugio* proprietor and by Etna herself. But what the hell, I was a single man, free to be foolish, free to walk where his feet point him, to seek experience even through the portal of Hell. Perspiring, I thought of Empedocles. He was a fifth century BC Greek philosopher, from Akragas, now Agrigento, on the south coast, a democratic politician, civic engineer, and wannabe god. He had studied the mystical philosophy of Pythagoras, a system in which all creatures reincarnate into higher forms, and he believed himself only one step, one reincarnation away from divinity. When he had had enough of life as a mortal, he marched up the side of Etna, trailed by his white-robed disciples, to take that last step.

How many hours was it into the day? It couldn't be much past noon since Helios still

lingered high overhead, but I had no sense of time passing, ascending the bridge of Typhon's nose seemed walking in place. But now I stepped carefully, forsaking the view across Sicily for the view of the exact placement of my feet. I could not tell how much time passed, as slowly I left the hot lava, finally ascending again warm volcanic scree. I knew I was at almost 11,000 feet, as the flanks of the mountain seemed to be converging on me left and right. Etna boomed louder and clouds of black smoke rolled overhead; the thin air tasted acrid with sulfur; a light cinder rain darkened my hair and clothes; small stones tapped and tapped on my shoulders.

I worked around an outcropping, hauling myself onto a ledge, and suddenly, the ground before my feet fell away into blackness. I was on my knees on the edge of a vast crater. Straight ahead, smoke and blue sky and no more mountain. Dizzy, I crawled back from the edge. Across this vast emptiness, the far rim seemed miles away, lost in curtains of smoke. Left and right and behind, I saw Sicily's twisted valleys, scattered tiny villages, ridges like rhinoceros skin running away into the Mediterranean haze. Again I thought of Empedocles, who handed his cloak to a follower, announced his coming resurrection, and threw himself into the burning depths. Milton put Empedocles in Hell in *Paradise Lost* for this hubris, but I began to appreciate the grandeur of this act, now that I was looking down the throat of an angry mountain that did not want me there. Empedocles chose a deliberate ritual immolation into the violent and indifferent divinity; the greatest leap of faith being that into death, that one might pass through it. This is the act most free of all, to wrest the time and manner of our death from the hands of the Fates. I began to imagine my own white-robed disciples lined up behind me down the slope. Legend has it that Hephaestus threw back one of Empedocles' sandals to prove that the man was certainly not a god. A parallel, more faithful version (that is, more full of faith), reports that the sandal flew out delicately bronzed, proving the philosopher had been transformed. How beautifully simple his leap, how fine the sheer clarity of it.

I felt contradictory urges pulling different directions. But I kept my pumice-shredded

Vietnam-era jungle boots well back from the rim. I looked around for my white-robed devotees, but they had fled. Eleven-thousand feet up a snowy mountain in mid winter, perspiration ran from my nose and soaked my slacks. I tried to focus. Through the billowing smoke, I could just see across the crater to the south rim. From there, five thousand feet below, lay the tourist center on Etna, Rifugio Sapienza, the highest approach by road for day-trippers and tourist-belching buses. There food and rest are found. I had planned to walk the rim around to the south side, but now I saw that as it snaked around the crater, it was less than two feet wide and split by a crack seeping smoke. The crater boomed and black cinder rained. I thought of Hephaestus, sure, and Typhon, certainly, and even Queen Elizabeth I, and saw immediately why people wanted stories to explain this place.

*

What is truly the worst *a' mutagna* can do? Well, fifty-five square kilometers on the east side collapsed, possibly as recently as 1500 BCE, possibly driving the Bronze-Age Sicanians to central and west Sicily. This event would have voiced a roar and wave of death loud enough to have echoed in story among Mediterranean peoples, and apparently it did; the Sicilian Greek historian, Diodorus Siculus, (1st Century BCE) reports that he heard stories of it. Then, apparently, Etna wiped out the Greek colony of Katane (now Catania) just a few years after its founding. That they boldly rebuilt the town says something about the maturity of the Greek relationship to their gods. There have been something like sixty major destructive eruptions of Etna since Pindar. Eighty years after his account, a lava flow blocked the advance of a Carthaginian army toward Syracuse. More recently, one of the worst eruptions occurred on this southern, most-populated side. In 1669, an immense rent, twelve miles long, opened above Nicolosi and spewed a torrent of lava into the Catania plain, destroying a quarter of Catania city as it flowed to the sea. Tongues of lava formed a small promontory offshore, making a useful breakwater for the harbor. On the site of the

eruption rose two conical hills—the Monti Rossi—each more than three hundred feet high, and together, more than two miles in circumference.

On Etna's west slope, in the town of Bronte, just the say the date "1843", and citizens might shiver or cross themselves. This town, known for the most wonderful pistachios in Italy, was rolling up the streets on the evening of 17 November when fifteen vents opened up on the slope above it. Giuseppe Cimbali in his 1887 book *Terra di Fuoco – Leggende siciliane* (*Land of Fire - Sicilian legends*) evokes the scene with wonderfully purple prose:

> [. . .] A dense fog, like a mantel of bronze, covered everything, sky and land. In the heavy and oppressing air hovered such a hot and inflammable filminess that the minimum rubbing, a slight spark, could have started a universal fire. Everywhere a nauseating and caustic odor of fused metals that was burning the eyes, slapping the face, oppressing the lungs; it was hard to breathe. . . Then, suddenly the scene changed, becoming more dreadful. Some stunning booms, rumbling continuously and causing terrifying echoes everywhere . . . shaking houses, mounts, the ground itself like a tree leaf, and, it looked like they wanted to overwhelm the entire universe, enlivened, more somberly, the silence of the mute, impending darkness.

You can still see the three lava rivers that charged downhill: from the Circumetnea train, whose rails pass through this black congealed violence above Bronte and from the incoming Alitalia flight as you circle the mountain before descending to the Catania airport. The central one rolled toward Bronte, eight hundred meters (half-a-mile) wide and moving at about one kilometer an hour. The townspeople, stricken by fear and anxiety, gathered their valuables (which, for the poor, is everything that can be moved, including roof tiles and doors), preparing to abandon the town. Then, just in time, arrived the "commendatore Giuseppe Parisi", superintendent for Catania Province, and his presence (" the slowing of the lava) evidently reassured them enough to stay. Five days later, another lava flow opened, this one about four hundred meters wide and seven to twelve meters high—as tall as a three-story building if you can trust the accounts, which I am not sure you can— cutting off the

main road. Fearful and fascinated citizens came from all around to stare at the awesome spectacle. The wall of lava flowed slowly towards factories, aqueducts and the Simeto River. Men cut trees to create a firebreak. The lava slowed, hardened, and stopped. Back up at the vent, the eruption resumed the next day, but for the time being Bronte seemed spared.

Then came the 25^{th} of November. A cannonade of booms thundered and leaping flames illuminated a dense smoky cloud, diffusing the land with a directionless and inescapable reddish glow. According Cimbali,

> ...worry then became fear, and the words of surprise became shrieking with terror. An interminable cry burst out, quivering from everybody's hearth. They were lost: and, in the imminence of the definite danger, there was a fervent praying, a disdainful cursing, a turbulent abandoning of the houses, a crazy ringing the warning bells, a hasty running into the churches, as a last refuge, a reciprocal calling and calling desperately, a furious embracing and kissing as for the last farewell.

A slow lava flow entered the farm of chemist Ignazio Zappia, where men frantically were digging up young pistachio trees for transplanting to a safer zone. A few people noticed that the stalled lava on Zappia's farm was swelling slowly, expanding into a dome, but no one took the warning. Then, the town, some distance away, heard a dreadful boom that seemed to resound all over Sicily. A hot and dense fog swept across the sky, eclipsing the sun. The dome on Zappia's farm had exploded violently, throwing molten rock in all directions, releasing a dense front of smoke, dirt, and glowing ash that expanded with terrible speed. Cimbali describes how some victims were vaporized and others ran wildly about, burning like living torches, then writhing, slumping to the ground and curling up like burnt leaves. Thirty-six people died, thirty-three others, horribly burned, were carried back to town. Only ten of these survived. Vulcanologists figured out later that the lava had flowed over a well. Steam pressure expanded the lava from below until the mass exploded.

Finally, it was obvious that this situation required divine intervention. Residents of Bronte might have recalled Agatha of Catania. Shortly after her martyrdom in the third century, her veil saved Catania from a lava flow and has done so often since. An angry god bent on destruction can be countered only by protecting goddess. So, in Bronte:

> When, the day after, all the people ran to the church to pray the Great Lady to have pity on them and save them from other disasters and other victims, they found the marvellous marble statue with two large tears trembling in her eyes and with some sweat on her forehead. She had not forgotten her beloved sons! It meant that those victims were necessary and, although she had tried hard to intercede, she could have not obtained the requested grace, from God's mercy, in times of so much corruption.

The townspeople formed a procession that carried a statue of the Madonna to face the lava stream, to placate the fury of the volcano. The eruptions stopped. Since then, Bronte has suffered only from the usual earthquakes and epidemics.

Etna did make more fuss on Bronte's side of the mountain, however. In 1865, M. Fouqué, a French geologist, detected Hephaestus at work, when seven new craters opened:

> The three upper craters produced two or three times a minute, powerful detonations like thunderclaps. The lower craters, on the contrary, incessantly gave forth a succession of reports too rapid to be reckoned. These sounds, although unremitting, were clear and distinct, the one from the other. I can find no better comparison for them than the strokes of a hammer falling on an anvil. This eruption continued for several months.

On the south side of Etna, an 1852 eruption of great violence continued for several months. It began, as usual, with hollow underground rumblings. Then dense columns of vapor, dust, and ashes blasted high into the air, spun into enormous eddies by fierce whirlwinds. Huge fragments of broken rock soared to a great height, along with vast quantities

of hot stones, cinders, and black sand. Two mouths spewed immense streams of lava down the slope. The streams merged to one, forming on the Catania plains a river of liquid fire nearly three kilometers in breadth and up to three meters in depth, rolling along at thirty meters an hour, scything through the rich and populated plains.

*

On hands and knees, I looked into the largest of the three central craters as Etna roared and rained ash. I told myself that I was not afraid. She was not going to erupt under me, not here and not now; she might always be angry, but she was family. I came down off of the rim and began the exhausting scramble horizontally around east side of the great central craters. Each footstep seemed weighted as it plunged into the loose scree, my feet pulled downhill. In an hour, maybe two, I was on the mountain's south side. *Rifugio Sapienza* nestled below, hidden by a bulge. As the sun slowly descended on my right, the plain of Catania appeared through cloud, a tiny patchwork of brown fields and dark green citrus groves, like little squares filled with rows of tiny black pencil points. On the coast, Catania city spread like a grainy grey stain. For a moment, I quailed at what waited down at the *rifugio*: gift shops selling lava Madonnas that light up, aprons sporting the scrotum of Michelangelo's David, fast food cafeterias looking out on parking lots. There, one need not be intimate with the mountain. Even down there, more than halfway up the mountain herself, many people experience Etna by sitting inside and watching eruptions on video. This requires an almost purposeful lack of imagination since one needs just to stand in the car park and look around. This entire tourist complex floats on thick waves of black fresh lava from Etna's expressed displeasure at the place in 2002. So, rather than descend into tacky tourist land after such an intense commune with the volcano, I thought of building a little basalt hut up here at the summit and becoming the Sage of Etna, living on stale panini donated by pilgrims seeking wisdom, until Etna erased me. A lovely thought, but first I needed to acquire some wisdom, so I turned downhill.

The loose scree that had been so tedious when ascending became the mountain's means of expelling me. I found myself accelerating without intending to, at first like a tiny beetle slipping down a sand dune, then like a deer or mountain goat, bounding down in exhilarating leaps. I had discovered what climbers call "scree-skiing". A concrete shelter rose before me, then passed and rushed uphill; a ruined wooden hut raced past, then a twisted chairlift tower. Ahead lay a cluster of buildings and the parking lot. In sixty or so giddy minutes, I had raced down what had taken most of the day to ascend, my socks now painfully full of stones. I skidded to a stop behind a sign. On the downhill side, message in four languages warned "Danger, mountain be closed. Is forbidden." Yes, well...

I shuffled into the cafeteria for water, a stale panino, and a cup of hot tea. The waiter stared at me: there were only the two of us and the parking lot was empty. So, he wondered, where had I come from? Well, I could hardly tell him how I had sought immortality but the mountain had spat me back. To be sure, I was bronzed, but only by the sun (abbronzare is "to tan" in Italian). Not exactly reincarnated, but I felt a little richer, some degree grateful. Despite her rejection, I learned respect and affection for my ancestor.

I am sitting now again on Etna, in that same cafeteria, writing the final draft of this chapter, as a couple of my clients ride the cable car further up (one of whom I discovered later got herself drunk beforehand). I feel now even more that, beyond being enriched by encounters with Etna, I have found a family connection. Although it is too late for the mountain to inscribe itself on my character as it does on children growing up attached to her flanks, I feel that I have inherited from these people of Etna some sense of the active presence of gods and a sense of humility before them. This it was that had been awakened in me on that first climb. Humility before the active divine powers of the Earth is not an American sense of things, but given how our abused planet will make us pay for our lack of respect and affection for her, it is a sense we might well learn.

*

When I walked in the countryside near Siracusa with my friend Pamela, nearly two decades after that first climb and the mushroom cloud rose, I was reminded of that first meeting with Etna and all she had come to mean to me. I was glad I had learned her story, and learned how Empedocles, Pindar, Hadrian, Polyphemus the Cyclops, and the people of Bronte are characters in my own story. Etna was a hostile relative perhaps, but a relative whose grumpiness felt like attention (for grumpy love is the Sicilian grandmother), whose shower of ash seemed personal, somehow familiar. With the bubbling song of the skylarks stilled and the cuckoo quiet, Pamela and I were quiet too. Encounters with gods and goddesses are times for paying attention, as they speak to us in voiceless grand gestures, reminding us ultimately who is in charge.

Pamela and I returned to her car and drove home, followed by an expanding oval of grey-brown cloud far over our heads. It was like a muddy river in the sea-blue sky, pressed against the sun. I wanted to quote Virgil to Pamela, but I knew she would roll her eyes, life her chin skyward, and say, with Sicilian impatience, "beh."

> Aetna's throat . . . with roar of frightful ruin thunders nigh. Now to the realm of light it lifts a cloud of pitch-black, whirling smoke, and fiery dust, shooting out globes of flame, with monster tongues that lick the stars; now huge crags of itself, out of the bowels of the mountain torn, its maw disgorges, while the molten rock rolls screaming skyward; from the nether deep the fathomless abyss makes ebb and flow. . . . Trinacria's isle [Sicily] trembles and moans. . .
>
> Virgil (*Æneid*, III.570ff, ca. 20s BC)

Back in Siracusa, seventy miles away from *a' muntagna*, we saw that the parked cars were dusted dark grey and a fine black grit covered the balconies.