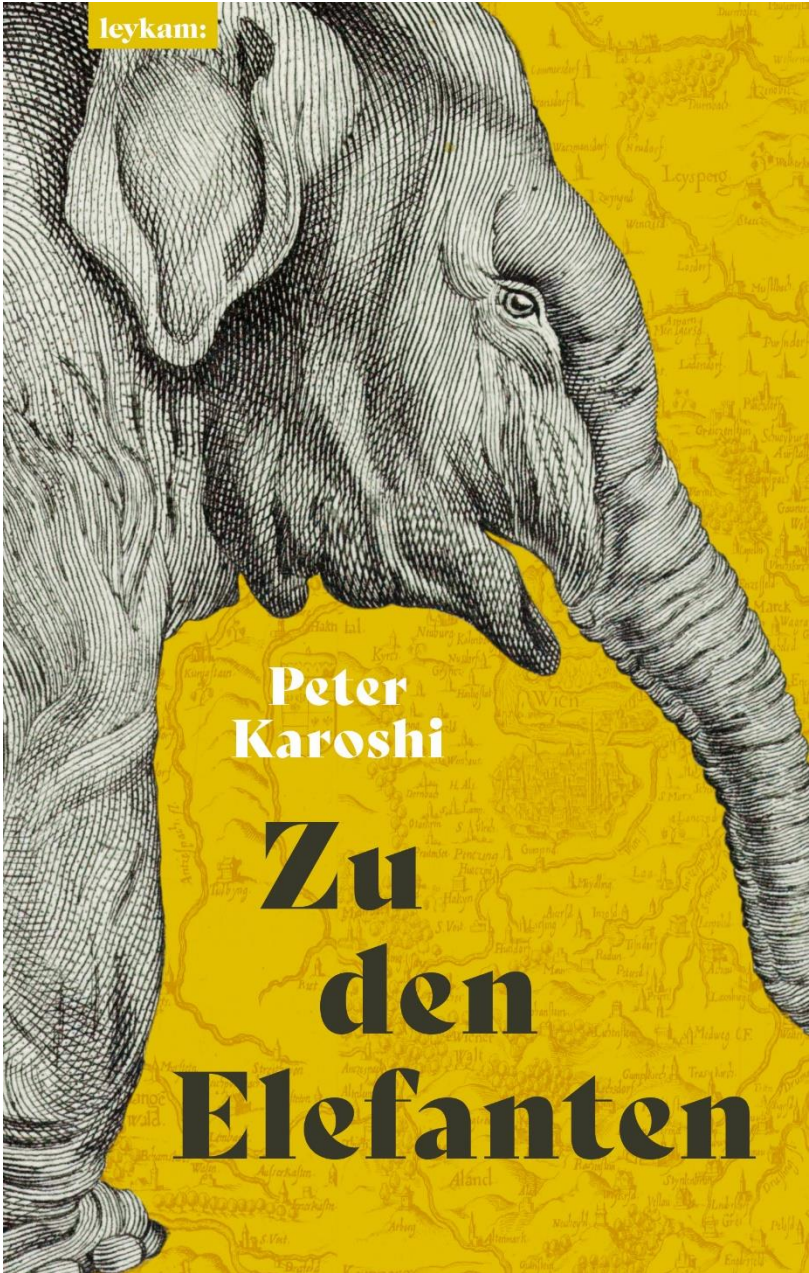


leykam:

Peter
Karoshi

**Zu
den
Elefanten**



PETER KAROSHI

Tracking the Elephants

A Novella

*Extract translated from the
German by Rebecca DeWald*

leykam: *Fiction*

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Monday, 2 July

My name is Theo, and I always took everything that happened at face value. That's how it seems to me sometimes anyway. A character trait that does not exclude the possibility of analysing one's own experiences, quite the contrary. Alongside feeding a desire to understand, this travel diary probably also serves the need for examination and collection, which may be an inalienable fact. That is why I thought, back when we first arrived in Salzburg's Lungau region, that the village of Sonnseit was a peculiar place. It had been raining for hours, since Vienna, to be precise. Sonnseit is not a good place to spend one's entire summer holidays. The prospect of two months alone with Anna, my wife, and my son Moritz in frightful isolation filled me with dread. Accordingly, I was in a bad mood. But well, I also recognized this as a recurring feeling of anxiety, having just arrived after a four-hour drive.

The village is accessible via a single road. The first section meanders in narrow switchbacks through the forest, and the last section higher up through meadows, splitting Sonnseit into the upper main village comprising of about fifteen houses, ex-farm buildings and an inn that had shut down three years earlier, and the lower part huddled into a small valley basin at the foot of a mountain range. Beneath the lowest peak on the left, at the end

of the tarmac road lies our house, always within sight of the highest summit on the right. It is squeezed in with three other detached houses, which were probably all built around the same time. On the way through the basin, there are four more houses, all much older.

At this point, it was not foreseeable that Moritz and I would leave this place without her a mere two weeks later.

There was only a mild drizzle in the early evening of this first day, the wind was now blowing through the leaves of the hedges along the brook, a sound that had replaced the trickling of the rain. I was just thinking about the first steps I could take towards a cautious reconciliation with Anna when the sun broke through the cloud cover once again. A friendly light filled the garden with warmth and I thought to myself that this was a good sign, that things always chose their own right moment to be resolved, to be continued. On the damp lawn, bordered on the left-hand side by shrubs and the road, and on the other side by an increasingly overgrown area leading towards the forest, I saw a pied wagtail bouncing along. I quickly honed in on the few seconds in which the bird seemed to scurry. Perhaps the rain had lured the usual worms out of the soil or left bugs lying immobile in the grass. Whatever the bird was looking for, it seemed unable to find it in its initial haste. Could it be that it had overlooked something? I stared at the wagtail in confusion. We had spent several summer holidays

in Sonnseit already, and yet I had never noticed these birds as something remarkable. Was it that my attention had changed, or their behaviour? Was I poised to help the animal?

The wagtail now seemed to scoot even faster across the wet grass, seemingly without a plan, or pursuing a goal I was unable to define. Its long tail feathers wagged along with the bobbing of the rest of its fragile-looking body. The small grey and blueish dart shot forward yet again, its tail aiming for an additional turn, almost getting carried away. This pattern remained a mystery to me, I did not understand one iota of what I was observing. It was as if someone had given me a project plan that had got out of hand and that I was asked to examine from afar. In its rush and excitement, the bird portrayed almost human traits. I stood up to demonstrate my presence, to shake the animal out of its misery, since its condition moved me so much. The graceful figure was driven by zeal and great enthusiasm, while the friendly colours of the water gathering in its feathers were in keeping with the rainy weather. Perhaps, I thought, the bird needs my help since I am present and available. Then again, this was of course more than presumptuous, it was nonsense, meddling in things that are none of my business.

The wagtail is a strange creature, I thought then, how it seems to nudge me into having a good look at myself as if everything here was all about me. Back then, I increasingly tried to locate

the centre of my world, just as people a few years my elders had predicted would be the natural course of events. (At the time, I had laughed about it, laughed about friends and the dubious ideas they had about their own lives.) For the time being, the bird had completed its journey through the garden and was flitting at breakneck speed in ungainly twists and turns towards the shrubs along the road. Its zigzagging flight corresponded to the charming but pitiable aimlessness it had displayed earlier.

I was able to make sense of my feelings because I had read and heard a lot in my life, and I recognized this momentary excitement and the storm it could unleash. And that is precisely why I did not give in to any of these illusions, and did not draw ad hoc conclusions or took far-reaching measures. No, quite on the contrary, something was happening there, in the dusk, that I was unable to explain. I felt very much confirmed in suspecting this to be something of significance.

I heard the floorboards creak inside the house behind me. As I was preparing to apologize to her for what I said earlier, it was Moritz who walked through the door. He took a run-up, raced towards me and went for a tackle. I just about managed to stop him, laughing, and he planted himself next to me and stared into the garden mirroring my air of gravitas. I placed a hand on his shoulder. At nine years of age, a child has already outgrown their parents, so I gave him a squeeze that was even gentler for it, always careful not to hurt him. A delicate age for both of us, I thought, forty and nine.

“Why aren’t you inside?” he asked.

“I was watching a bird.”

But he had already lost interest in my reasons why. I did not mean to be didactic, but I couldn't help myself. Nine years marks a threshold, an age of transition. My son listened to my reflections on the wagtail and what I had witnessed, casting me a kind look from below.

Well, I thought then, nothing is fixed anymore, everything remains indeterminate and in flux. All that could be taken from this strange event was feelings. I expected too much of myself. It is people like me who remain vivid in one's memory, people who lecture others from their high pedestal. Back in the day, I could have done without that as well.

“Did you fight?” he pulled me back into the present. “You shouldn’t do that.”

This endearing confidence of his I admire so much. I nodded. “It wasn’t a serious fight. More of a disagreement.”

He was used to it so he nodded knowingly, and we went back inside and I did not apologize, because it was no longer necessary, because we got on well and had started to talk about other things, and I had forgotten the bird and the thoughts it had triggered. That night, just before I nodded off, the encounter with the wagtail came to my mind once more. The image appeared so vividly as if I had conjured it up at the snap of my fingers,

and I was reminded of my youth, which felt like an indefinitely long time ago. This made me think yet again about my current situation. Back then, at night in bed, I would imagine all the great things I wanted to achieve and all the people I ultimately hoped to impress. It seemed to me that it had all started at the age of nine, and had stopped when I became a father, going to bed had become an immediate falling asleep, however much my dozy mind had wanted to cling to the possibility of performing miracles, at least at night. I was an adult now and everything had become a furious whirl of events. I constantly found myself returning to the same situations which I thought I had only recently left behind: getting up, meal times, the constant deadlock at work and going to bed, ideally at the same time every night.

That night, I tried to think my way deeper into this whirl, already fearful of a bout of insomnia, when suddenly this puzzling image of the wagtail let go of me and I fell asleep, also because Anna pressed against me in her slumber.