



Life Beyond the Binary Code

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Life Beyond the Binary Code

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Select Prose and Poetry

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Creative Writing, Spring 2014

Language Center

Tampere University of Technology



Life Beyond the Binary Code

Select Prose and Poetry

Timo Lepistö (ed.)

Creative Writing, Spring 2014

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Tampere University of Technology

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FOREWORD

I wish to thank my students, who so enthusiastically participated in this first-ever creative writing course at the Language Center of Tampere University of Technology and earnestly labored to contribute to this authors'-best collection of short stories and poetry.

Despite being somewhat experimental and despite the seeming incongruity of creative writing in an engineering-scientific setting, the course soon produced results beyond expectation. As the writers gained confidence in their craft, their stories began to reveal ever deeper insight into human interaction, nuances of character, and details of description and action. The outcome is a wonderful array of stories ranging from youthfully boisterous action to conflict, tragedy, and pain and their resolution to turning points in life reached through quiet catharsis or cataclysm. And all this with touches of wit, humor, irony, and pure delight in imagination and achievement.

Poetry writing, an option, was likewise eagerly engaged in by some and produced amazingly mature, intellectual, witty, and even shocking slices of human experience. In fact, let the following "Creative Writing, High Tech" by Stefanie Kohlhoff serve as an apt summary of the writers' shared experience of the course.

As the poet observes, there is, indeed, room for the poet in engineers, for the common denominators of success in artistic as well as scientific endeavor seem to be the same: imagination, enthusiasm, and skill through hands-on effort.

Timo Lepistö,
Instructor

Creative Writing, HighTech

Playing with words is serious fun!
Timo, he showed us how it's done.
We started with stories of boxes and bitches,
wars and circles, forests and witches.
Easy it wasn't, at times we got stuck,
just couldn't go further but pedaled in a rut.
Then often words just wouldn't stop flowing,
stories expanded and we kept going
till downright novels we brought on the table
to show that surely we're eminently able
to do more than crack the darn binary code;
who knows, could've chosen a different road
altogether in life, even literary ways,
hey, that would've surely changed our days
into something quite different. But now we are here,
saving the world with some technical gear.
Yet there is room for the poet in us,
as easily seen if you look at it thus:
a book full of stories, lives we imagined,
witty and woeful, truth-like to legend.
Dear reader, we hope you enjoy it as we did,
we honestly wish it never had ended!

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Nowhere

by Nemat Dehghani

Then he suddenly saw it, the photo of his high school time, when he was thirteen years old. How was that possible? Two decades ago! Has it been that long already? Am I awake? Who am I? All the good and bad memories surfaced in a rush. Oh, God, this here is Mr. Anderson and his car, my dad's best friend, who loved traveling and who talked mostly about what he had seen and experienced during his trips. Tom suddenly remembered what he had been thinking and dreaming about as a kid: yes, to be Mr. Anderson! The memories flooded his mind in waves of words swirling about in his head. Yes, he was unlike his father, partly Mr. Anderson with a curious mind to explore the universe and only partly like his father, the famous journalist, who spend his days at the office writing award-winning reports for the city newspaper. Occasionally Tom had been thinking about his future, about what to do. Certainly he didn't want to hole in at home or office, yet he didn't fancy venturing too far beyond the city and their house.

The room was comfortable and he was sitting in small, old

lounge chair his father had left him. He felt agitated though, stood up and started pacing about the room. The clock on a near-by table chimed: two more hours to his trip—to an unknown place. He kept walking about, thinking about the day it had occurred to him that traveling might just be the best way to distance him from the exigencies of life. He had gone to the train station to buy a ticket without any destination in mind, just walked to the ticket counter and asked for a ticket to somewhere people liked to go.

The clerk at the desk had asked, ‘What d’you mean?’ All confused, she had stood up and gone to ask her tired-looking colleague in old-fashioned, horn-rimmed glasses, who only rephrased the younger clerk’s question.

‘Excuse me, sir, but what is it you want?’

Tom realized then how silly his request had been. He thanked the clerk and moved quickly to a far corner in the station and sat down, away from the curious glances from the ticket clerks. He kept watching the travelers milling about him. Glancing down, his eye fixed on a piece of paper near his shoe, and he recognized it as an expired ticket to Farland City. Yes, to go to Farland, he thought. Something ignited in his mind and he briskly walked back to the counter, and to the young clerk’s surprise requested a ticket to Farland.

The doorbell rang. The driver, finally, Tom thought, and went to answer the door. A tall, well-dressed man stood there and greeted him brightly: ‘Hey, Tom, I’m Martin, remember, your friend from high school!’ Silence fell between them, and then the man tried to hug him.

Shocked, Tom withdrew and stammered, ‘p-please, come in,’ leaned on the old chair and inquired, ‘Martin! Really! What happened to you? How did you find me?’

The clock chimed again. Hesitantly first but gaining confidence, Tom started with his plan to go to Farland and showed Martin his ticket. Then abruptly he said, 'I'm not going to Farland, after all.'

After a moment's silence, he continued, conviction in his voice, 'If *you* could find me, maybe I should try finding myself too. Thanks, Martin.'

New Life

by Amir Farughian

They were both gazing at the lake, feeling the faint breeze against their faces. The only sound floating across the water was the soft lapping of waves against the boat. The place was beautiful beyond belief, but it was still unable to ease my grief. My parents had married right here on this spot. But it was a long time ago. A lot of heartache can break even the deepest love.

After a while they came inside. My mother stopped in front of me, looked at me solemnly and said, ‘Darling, your father and I have something to tell you.’

I knew something was up, and I gave her a weary look. Mom put her hand on my shoulder, exchanged glances with dad, and after a pause said, ‘Honey, your father and I love you very much . . .’ She paused again and looked at dad. ‘You know that?’

‘Yeah, mom. What's going on?’

She looked back at dad, and there was something in both their expressions that I just couldn't read. Dad took a deep breath.

‘Your mother and I are getting divorced,’ he let out in

a rush. I stared at him.

‘You’re . . . ’ I could go no further.

They were quiet, letting me process what dad had just told me. I felt paralyzed, unable to grasp the idea of my parents splitting up.

‘Why?’ I finally asked, voice cracking.

‘Well . . . ,’ mom started, ‘sometimes things just don’t work out the way people want them to.’

I didn’t realize I was crying until a sob slipped through my lips. Mom pulled me into a hug, saying, ‘Oh, honey.’ I let her hold me and buried my face in her shoulder. What happens now? Who would I live with? Why was this happening?

I didn’t remember falling asleep that night. In two days, a woman arrived at our house. She introduced herself and explained that she would be my counselor of sorts.

‘I’ll be someone you can talk to, if you ever feel like you don’t want to talk to your mom or dad. I’ll also have a say in which parent gets custody of you, but first I’d like to get to know you a little better,’ she said with a businesslike smile.

I didn’t really trust her, nor did I want to talk to her. I let her into my room, at her request, and answered her questions. They were simple: things like my hobbies, how my grades were, who my friends were and where we went, my favorite song and such. I answered minimally, to say the least. It made me uncomfortable that she was writing down all my answers and would probably show them to her boss or a judge or something.

The divorce process went on and on. I stayed at my grandma’s a lot. Grandma and I would sit and talk over dinner about meaningless things. How was your day today? she would ask. It was fine, was my usual reply. I never said

much. My brain was elsewhere. Grandma tried to take my mind off the divorce by playing board games and renting movies. It never really worked though. My mind was always lost in how my family was falling apart.

My parents fought over my custody. In the end mom won. Dad moved out first, then mom and I left the house. I felt numb most of the time. I wanted a mommy and daddy, at the same time, not one on weekdays and the other at weekends. That wasn't fair.

Now my mom and dad have to share me! They have divided me between them! During the week I stay with mom and weekends with dad. They care for me so much. Now I have two birthday parties every year, one with mom and another with dad. On my birthday, dad gave me a fantastic mobile phone, and soon mom gave me an even better one with some other groovy stuff. It's like my mom and dad were competing to make me happy. My friends keep telling me, don't worry, be happy. You are lucky. You have two families now! That means twice the birthday presents!

I'm getting used to my new life. But that doesn't mean I'm happy. My parents broke my heart, just like they aren't supposed to. Parents aren't supposed to break their children's hearts, are they? They should know I don't want presents. I want a family.

The Veil

by Stefanie Kohlhoff

And then I suddenly saw it. The perfect veil. It was exactly what I had been looking for and would match my wedding dress beautifully. The dress I had already found weeks ago, but I had not been able to find a veil. And it was only a few weeks until my wedding.

You know, usually it is the wedding dress that everybody is concerned about. When their daughters get engaged, mothers bring out their old, smelly and yellowed-down wedding dresses to give to their daughters, although the dresses never fit, not even after altering, and—ironically—will make their daughters look like old-fashioned spinsters! TV-reality shows go on and on about overweight girls looking for the dress of their dreams. They hope to look like a princess and end up choosing some horrible piece that makes them look like a ridiculous, oversized cream cake.

At my own wedding, I would not be the princess, but the queen. And sure as hell people would start to cry, but not just out of simplistic emotion, but out of the realization that they

would never look like me, however hard they tried. I would be the queen and the veil would be my crown.

I can't imagine why nobody realizes that the bridal veil is much more important than the dress. The veil is the expression of the bride's purity and modesty. It also hides the true beauty of the bride until the last moment, when it is revealed to God, the groom and the rest of the lot (which will be smoldering with envy, in my case). The quality of the veil mirrors the bride's status, and so my veil must be of the finest and most expensive quality, hand sewn and in all aspects fabulous. Of course.

And now I had finally found it. The only problem was that my veil was stuck to the horrible hair-do of Maddy, who definitely was not worth the beauty of the veil. Maddy was about to get married in a few hours, and I was filling in for a bridesmaid who had gotten sick with the stomach flu the day before. I had been asked to replace her, not because I was a close friend but because I was close enough in size. The bridesmaid's dress had to fit without too many alterations. Of course it had turned out to be sizes too big anyway. But I said yes, just to benefit from Maddy's influential family.

So the next day I arrived at the church and went to the side room, where everybody was getting ready. The moment I walked in, all I saw was the veil. It was breathtaking, of fingertip length, out of soft silk tulle and had the finest hand stitched lace I had ever seen.

At first I was shocked. Maddy was short and plain, with chubby legs and a mousy face with pimples. On top of it she was wearing one of the ugliest wedding dresses imaginable. It looked like out of a thirties horror movie, probably grandma's old one. Despite the wealth of her family, Maddy

was quite shy and insecure, not at all one to wear a veil like that. The veil must complement the beauty of the bride, not outshine it. Maddy was a total disgrace to the veil. I felt a migraine coming on out of sheer annoyance.

Then it dawned on me that I was there for a reason. My veil had somehow gotten to the wrong bride and I was sent there to claim it.

The other bridesmaids, puffy girls who put on the last touches of ugly make-up, eyed me suspiciously. I couldn't blame them. Maddy was just putting her garter on. Oh girl, you will never have my legs, even with the help of that personal trainer I heard your fiancé had hired. Who would want to have a garter that size anyway. You could lasso a cow with it.

Then Maddy's mother hurried to greet me.

'Thank you so much for stepping in at such short notice. You are such a sweetheart!'

'Oh that's what friends are for, right?' I smiled my sweetest smile. 'How could I say no.'

'Come here, you can change behind the folding screen. I'll fetch your dress, all necessary alterations have been made.' She left with a swinging step.

All the other bridesmaids were finished with their make-up and one after the other left the room to be out of the way, since the room was quite small. I was left alone with Maddy.

'Honey, you really look fabulous.' I used my friendliest voice.

'You think so?' She smiled timidly. 'Thank you so much for coming. It's too sad Sarah got ill.'

'Well, these things happen. Don't let it ruin your special day.'

‘I won't. I have been waiting for this day for such a long time.’

‘You should enjoy every least bit of it then. Your dress is gorgeous, by the way.’

‘Thank you, my Granny got married in it.’

I knew it.

‘And your veil is very nice, too. Where did you get it?’

‘My mom found it in Paris. It fits the dress nicely, doesn't it?’

Well, go mom, who would've thought.

‘It is wonderful. But honey, I'm not so sure if it really is the right one for your dress.’

‘Oh?’ She inspected herself nervously in the mirror.

Mom came in.

‘Here's your dress, sweetheart. I hope it fits better now. You really are quite petite, aren't you?’ She looked at me as if I were a little child.

The dress was horrid, but sometimes one has to make sacrifices. As I put it on, I noticed that it was still too big. Couldn't they even hire a proper seamstress, with all the money they had?

Suddenly we heard commotion from outside.

‘I wonder what's going on? I'll go and have a look. You two just make yourselves ready. I'll be back in a minute!’ Mom left.

‘About that veil, could I see how you look without it?’ I was determined to try everything I could.

‘Uh . . . I don't know. I think it looks good this way already.’ I could tell she was not convinced though.

‘Alright, sorry I asked. It's up to you. I just thought you might want to look your best today.’ I looked over her

shoulder and started touching up my make-up.

‘Well, ok, why not try it out.’ She smiled coyly. ‘You know more about style than me anyway.’

You bet.

She removed the veil, only to reveal the inexplicable sadness of her hairstyle. Someone had managed to make Maddy's hair look like a bunch of tentacles.

‘Let me have a look at you.’ I stepped back a few steps. ‘In my opinion, you look much more fresh and natural without the veil.’

She looked at herself, her eyes wide with apprehension.

‘I don't know. Mom would be sad if I didn't wear it. I guess I'll rather put it back on.’

At that moment Maddy's mom rushed back in.

‘Sweetie, your father's had a heart attack. The ambulance is on its way. Come with me, hurry!’

‘Oh my God, mom!’ Maddy had turned as white as her wedding dress and stormed out after her mother.

I was left alone in the room and could not believe my luck! Maddy had left the veil on the dressing table. It was clearly destiny. So I took it, folded it carefully and put it in my bag. I changed into my own clothes and left the bridesmaid's dress hanging over the partition. Nobody saw me as I left the church, with everybody probably at the hospital and the wedding postponed. I found a taxi and went home.

It was the happiest day of my life.

Power Overwhelming

by Lauri Linnell

I suddenly saw it. The cottage the pilgrim had mentioned some days ago. Rain poured down the mossy edges of the roof. The abandoned looking window, hidden behind a black vine, appeared surprisingly observant of its surroundings. The gloomy garden was overgrown into a jungle.

As I stepped on the loose sand, I realized I had chosen the correct shoes for this trip. The slightly padded hiking shoes saved me from completely sinking in the rain-soaked ground and among the plants and roots eager to grip me anywhere they could and drag me down to them. Were that to happen, no one would ever find me alive.

My mind was racing as I pondered if I had made the right decision after all coming to this deserted cottage. I took a final breath, slowly inhaling and exhaling with great force. Then I turned around.

‘Driver, are you sure this cottage is deserted and uninhabited?’ I gusted a nervous breath and gazed at the cottage once more.

The driver laughed and smacked the horses to move on.

He appeared to be in a hurry for some reason. The carriage vanished quickly in the rain, which felt cold on my face. In anger and desperation, I sighed as I was left alone in this rat trap, with nothing else to do but to walk to the cottage. The pilgrim had emphasized that this house was abandoned but worth seeing. I was yet to see why.

I was intrigued to see the inside of the house, but also scared as I was the sole person in miles. No one would hear me scream should something happen. There was no turning back now. I could only approach the house and take a peek inside. I managed my way through the vines and roots and was about to reach for the door knob when the door suddenly opened slowly, creaking. I turned pale. A woman, a real woman appeared in the doorway. How could that be?

The woman looked old and scary with crooked teeth and long thick hair, grey like the weather outside. Her skin matched her hair. She noticed me evaluating her. I was aware of her doing the same to me. We gazed awkwardly at one another. She bade me to enter. I hesitated a moment, but as the weather outside didn't seem like clearing anytime soon, I approached closer to the door. The old woman gestured me inside, so I did. As I passed her getting in, she sensed my mood.

'Boy, you look sad,' she creaked behind me. I ignored her and introduced myself instead.

'My name is Malcolm.' I reached out my hand.

She took it, and attempting a smile, said, 'Annabelle Salem.'

Her skin was ever so soft as we shook hands, and for some reason time had passed surprisingly quickly since I had come in. I was certain I hadn't been inside more than 15 minutes,

but the moon had already risen on the vast black curtain of sky.

She noticed my astonishment and said, 'Time travels 20 times faster in this cottage than it does anywhere else.' I did not believe her. Was she kidding me? She lifted her hand and pointed to my hair as if she was trying to show me something. I couldn't believe it. My hair had grown several inches. In a low voice I questioned this witchcraft.

'That is exactly what this is, witchcraft. You see, you came here for a reason. In the morning I already knew that you were coming. The driver is invisible to ordinary people and only the chosen ones can find this place.'

Ordinary people? The chosen ones? I had no idea what she meant by those, but nothing good for certain.

'I know what and who you are, my dear boy,' the woman suddenly blasted in a stentorian voice. All the glass jars on her shelves trembled as if in fright.

'You are a wizard, an incarnation of Malcolm Sawyer, one of the greatest wizards ever to live in the 15th century. You are still unaware of the power you hold inside you, but I know what you are going through.'

How did she know about my dreams of flames and screams, gory nightmares about witch-hunts and trials?

'What do you think you know about my life! You are nothing but an old scary hag, frightening kids who make the mistake of coming inside your crummy house!'

After I had said that, I felt remorseful. I realized I had acted out inappropriately. Almost immediately the old woman's face turned grave. She was not kidding me at all. The little warmth she had shown was gone.

There was now only a cold shell and even colder eyes

piercing into mine as if in search of something inside me. I was now certain she was a witch. As I looked around the house for the first time, I noticed all the hidden clues about her being. The usual symbols of witchcraft were there: the cauldron, chalices, labelled jars, holding items I had never heard of.

‘You have the same birth mark as I do,’ I said surprised.

‘This is the symbol of Stigma Diaboli. It allows us to travel through the two worlds. It also protects us from all that is good,’ she explained. I was suddenly woozy.

‘Here, drink this formula. It will make you feel better.’ I looked at the bottle. She was trying to give me an evil elixir, no doubt about it. She sensed my unwillingness and stood up. Was it only my imagination or had the woman become taller and demonic.

‘Your family is nothing but a bunch of puppets, made by the High Witch to look after you to the point of your awakening, which is happening as we speak.’

The woman covered her face with her left hand and squeezed hard. The face started to peel off to reveal a hideously deformed one underneath. The mask had acted like glue and now that it was gone, her whole skin started to flake off and expose a true, demonic form: a bald head, clawed hands and toeless feet.

‘Now that you see me as I truly am, how do you feel?’

I was scared, petrified, and cold and . . . intrigued? What was this sorcery? Moments ago I wanted nothing else but to wake up from this nightmare. But now I was curious. I took another look at the mysterious potion. It was a murky substance yet somehow glimmering all green at the same time, whispering my name. The cap was tight around the top

but came off easily once I grasped it and gave it a yank.

The silence strangled me. I was no longer scared. I knew what was going to happen next. I took my time and kept stalling as long as I could. The former old woman, now a demonic being, kneeled before me. She had resorted to begging. Then several other demons appeared from the dark corners of the cottage and followed the witch's example. Was this my last moment as a human being? I felt empty at first, but I knew that I had inherited a gift that would change many lives to better or worse at my bidding. That gave me a demented desire to imbibe more of the liquid.

‘Power is life. How great the blessing! Who can tell the gulf between life and death? Yet life may be weak, sickly, unhealthy, painful, trying, anxious, worn, burdensome, joyless, spineless, to the last. Darkness is more than life. It is health, strength, power, vigour, activity, energy, manliness, beauty. I am now ready to become what I was meant to be.’ The world turned black as my lips touched the syrupy liquid.

When I opened my eyes again, I was alone. Something had definitely changed though. A fire stirred inside my veins and power gushed out of me in a sinister aura, ready to devour anyone daring to cross me. I saw a knife on the table. It had the chaotic pentacle symbol on it, glowing and calling me. I fondled the knife and began carving my flesh with it. ‘Madness is the emergency exit. You just step outside and close the door on all those dreadful things that happened to you. You can lock them away . . .’

This was the beginning of the end of mankind.

The Stranger

by Arto Nieminen

A bead of sweat rolled down Bennet's forehead as he stared out of his bedchamber window. He swept the glass with a piece of cloth. It was a cold morning, and the drizzle had steamed up the window a little. Hands shaking he wiped his face too. A hooded figure, which had just entered the courtyard, was dismounting a horse. A stranger.

'Please go away.' Bennet muttered and took a sip from his wine glass. The door to the gatehouse opened, and a pair of guards approached the stranger seemingly inquiring him about his business. Surely he is just an errand boy, Bennet thought as he saw the stranger pull a scroll of paper from a saddlebag. He will momentarily be on his way again, faring far, far away from here. Bennet twitched a smile as he rolled his long mustache between his fingers.

A guard opened the scroll and examined it closely. Soon he nodded to the figure and called for a stable boy to take the stranger's horse. Guided by one of the guards, Bennet saw the stranger disappear under the window towards the main entrance.

Bennet stared long into the courtyard and failed to notice a servant who had entered the bedchamber.

‘Milord?’ the servant uttered trying to catch Bennet’s attention. Bennet flinched and turned to meet the stare of his servant. ‘I . . . I heard something shatter, milord.’ Bennet looked slowly at the floor. The wine glass had broken and spilled its contents all over his feet. It took a moment for Bennet to gather himself while the servant was looking at him nervously.

‘What are you staring at?’ Bennet burst out angrily, ‘clean up this insolent wine at once!’

‘Of course, milord. At once, milord,’ the servant stuttered in confusion and began cleaning the floor. ‘Senechal has requested your presence, milord. I believe he wishes to discuss matters related to tonight’s feast.’

Bennet sighed. ‘Fetch me some clean clothes then. Hurry.’ He took a few wobbly steps backwards and sat on the side of his bed and hoped that the preparations for the feast would make him forget about this morning.

‘Ah, good morning, lord Bennet,’ said a familiar voice. Behind a desk filled with papers stood Bennet’s Senechal, Ilyes. ‘I am honored that you responded to my call so quickly.’

‘Morning, Ilyes,’ Bennet stated, bored. ‘What is it today?’

Ilyes glanced at a piece of paper. ‘There is a matter regarding tonight’s feast. I have been informed by the guards that Lady Adelia of the house of Merek has arrived this morning.’

‘A *Lady*?’ Bennet exclaimed in surprise.

‘Indeed, my lord,’ Ilyes continued, ‘she is headed to the

midlands and has requested for a place to rest before continuing her journey. I assume my lord wishes to show his hospitality and invite her to the feast?’

Since when have ladies been allowed to wear *pants*, Bennet wondered. And ride alone without protection or carriage. Utterly preposterous! And dangerous. However, Bennet knew he could not refuse hospitality. It would ruin his reputation.

‘Send her an invitation then. But make sure all the knives are blunt and double the guards,’ Bennet instructed. ‘And make her sit as far away from me as possible.’

‘As my lord wishes.’ Ilyes smiled awkwardly and returned to his work.

Bennet sat in the most magnificent chair in the great hall as familiar faces of his court members filed in to take their seats at numerous tables. Focused on the entrance, he paid little attention to the greetings he received. Bennet wiped his brow with a damp cloth and checked that the guards were at their posts.

The last court members took their places and the feast began. Bennet smiled, cheered up by the absence of anyone he did not recognize. Perhaps she had decided to leave early?

Then the herald cut through the laughter and feasting, announcing, ‘Lady Adelia of the House of Merek!’

At the double doors stood a young woman wearing a modest blue dress. No jewelry could be spotted on her, but she did not need any: her hair was long and glimmered like beautiful red rubies as she walked across the hall to her seat. Elegantly yet fiercely like a tiger’s her eyes glanced over the feasting assembly, daring anyone to meet their amber glow.

She was seated and the feast continued. Bennet kept staring at the doorway until the crescendos of laughter and dull knives stirred him from his musings. Who was this woman? What kind of tasteless shenanigan was this? Bennet reached over to his Senechal.

‘Ilyes, I must know,’ Bennet hissed.

‘Apologies, my lord, you must know what?’

‘Invite her to feast with me. You know who I mean. Hurry!’

Confused, Ilyes stood up and soon returned with delighted Lady Adelia.

‘You must be Lord Bennet,’ she said formally. ‘Thank you for the invitation. It was most courteous of you.’

Bennet harrumphed, ‘Ah, yes, it is me, yes,’ he laughed nervously, ‘would my Lady like to, eh, join me in conversation?’

Lady Adelia smiled. ‘I would be honored to.’

Bennet inquired Lady Adelia about various matters, such as dangers of horse riding and wearing pants as a highborn lady. Hours flew past as they conversed and for Bennet each question answered generated dozens more.

‘Do you not fear that bandits might assault you while you are traveling alone? Or what if you contract a pox while passing through a town filled with rabble?’

Lady Adelia replied amused, ‘for the things we love we are willing to take risks, are we not?’

They talked and laughed together until they were the only ones left in the hall. A rooster's crowing and first light finally interrupted them.

‘What a joyful time we have had, my lord, but I am afraid I must continue my journey.’

Bennet sighed and said, ‘when you return, will you pay me a visit? I will hold a feast at least ten times this size for you!’

Lady Adelia smirked, ‘I just might, my lord. But now I must go.’ She approached Bennet and kissed him lightly on the cheek. ‘Farewell, lord Bennet.’

Bennet watched elated as she left the great hall. What a woman, he thought and smiled more widely than ever before.

As Lady Adelia’s charm faded, Bennet realized that he hadn’t taken a single bite or a sip during the entire feast. He laughed loudly and grabbed a whole chicken from a bowl. Taming that beast in women’s clothes will be high adventure, and when she finally gets caught, she will be his. Forever.

He sunk his teeth into the juicy chicken breast and savored it. It tasted sweet, like belladonna.

Agnetha

by Mikko Nurminen

A quarter of an hour had passed since we had last uttered a word. Nature in her summer bloom provided our heavy silence with the soundtrack of happy bird chipper and gentle waves washing on the shore. But we could also hear murmured conversation from inside through the open windows behind us, voices of our family and friends, gathered here at the villa to enjoy a summer's day. To enjoy? How could I? How could they? Especially Johan. If only he had been as good in diving as he was in gabbing, I and Ulrika wouldn't be standing there.

My thoughts turned to the sweet sunny days we had spent together at the villa. Agnetha had found adventure and amazement in everything nature and the villa could offer. When she was five years old, she started to take us on little expeditions to see the wonders she had discovered. She opened our eyes to the little surprises around us, even though sometimes the surprise turned out to be just a colorful rock, glistening after a rain. During her last summer she had been captivated by water. She would observe the fish and other

aquatic life from the end of the jetty or go swimming. Or go on 'sea adventures' in the rowing boat. 'Daddy, can we go look for a treasure in the lake again?' After a couple of weeks, I was so tired of rowing that other people who happened to be at the villa had to take her out in the boat.

I found myself looking at the black and white photo of Agnetha through the window. There she would smile forever, surrounded by the black frame. Every now and then I would see from the corner of my eye how Ulrika shuffled her feet. I just remained fixed in my place, reclining against one of the veranda posts. I had stood motionless for so long that I was quite numb.

'Maybe we should go back inside, Lars, you know they are waiting for us.'

Her voice was almost too low to hear. But I didn't need to hear her words. I knew what she would eventually have to say, and how she wished I would react. Maybe it was cruel of me to even make her say the words. I didn't care.

'Oh, maybe we should. Because that would be the proper thing to do. And one should do what's right, isn't that so? And the proper thing for us now is to celebrate. So we should smile?' I spat the words back at her.

A sharp pain in my cheek. She had slapped me. Now I shredded anything that had been binding me and jumped at her. I gripped and held her. She shrieked and her body went stiff in my brutal embrace. She wasn't to blame, but she was there, so she would have to bear my anger at the world. She relaxed. A moment passed. She raised her hand and brushed away the tears from her cheek. My tears. She pushed me to an arm's length.

'I know your agony,' she whispered, 'but don't think I

don't feel the same?'

A cricket chirped and a warm breeze swept over the lake. Conversation had subsided inside. They must have been watching the unfolding of our drama on the veranda. I turned to face the lake. I looked down, then slowly raised my eyes from the varnished, shiny veranda floor to the fine plush green field descending to meet the lake. The beach. Finally, with one jerk of my head, I faced the jetty and the little rowing boat tied to it. A glance was enough. I swirled myself around to talk to Ulrika.

'You can go in now. I'll be with you in a minute!'

'I won't go without you.'

'Oh, but I am quite alright now.'

'No, you are not.'

'Maybe not, but I'll just take a quick walk and then come join you all.'

'Don't be foolish. Let me come with you.'

I brushed her hands away from my shoulders. I walked down to the basement of the villa and found there what I needed. A half-empty can of petrol and a matchbox. I walked down to the jetty. Jumping on to the boat made it sway, but I managed to keep my balance. As the boat steadied, I opened the petrol can, backed away and doused the boat with petrol. When I turned to climb to the jetty, I saw Ulrika there. Why hadn't I heard her? She was looking at me, transfixed on the matches in my hand.

'Give me the matches,' she said.

'No.'

'Give them to me, now!' Her voice was a roar. Stunned, I handed her the matches.

'Get up from there.'

I was quickly back on the jetty, but I couldn't face her.

I heard her untie the boat. Then a rustle, the opening of the matchbox. A quick pull of the match on the coarse striking surface. And then the random flicker of flames rising and reflecting on the jetty. Now I faced her. The kiss we shared was like drinking from the cup of life.

We walked back to the villa, holding hands. Giggles and sobs intermingled in our voices. People were settling back to their places when we came to the large dining room. They must have been watching us through the windows, again. We were the night's entertainment, it seemed.

Johan was sitting in a far corner. I rushed to him and offered my hand. His initial surprise melted away and he took my hand. At first he barely squeezed it, but then his grip tightened and he pulled me close. When he finally stopped repeating how sorry he was, I had the pleasure of forgiving him.

I saw the fire on the lake through the window. I rested my eyes on the flames for a while, then walked over to Karl. In his child's mind he didn't understand the impropriety of staring at the wreckage of people's mental breakdowns; he was simply, open mouthed, attracted by a burning boat. I stroked his hair. He looked first at Johan, his father, then at me.

'You and Ulrika burned the boat.'

'We did.'

'Looks fantastic!' He hesitated. 'Uncle Lars, I miss Agnetha.'

'I miss her too.'

I turned to face the people in the room. Conversation was still mostly respectfully solemn but was assuming happier

tones. Ulrika was listening to a story her sister was telling. I locked eyes with Ulrika and we smiled at each other. I stroked Karl's hair again.

Crossroads

by Anna Nykänen

I used to sleep well. As soon as I laid my head down, I would drift away. Even at the nursing home, I slept well. Only after my chronic obstructive pulmonary disease had improved to the point I was sent to a hospice 30 days ago, did the visitors start to keep me awake.

Every night, after 10 pm, they come and form a circle of chairs and we must talk. Their green eyes leering, they talk about the same things over and over again. The hospice doesn't allow visitors after 10 pm, but they come. I haven't told anyone that they come. I just asked the nurses for some extra chairs. The first evening, we had to sit on the floor and my knees didn't like that. The others are younger and they didn't mind, but they have now accepted the chairs.

I have three visitors. But they don't cheer me up. They keep talking about their times at crossroads. They should've chosen otherwise, but they didn't. And now they come here to talk about the same things over and over. They've already done it for 30 nights. I'm so tired of empathizing with their poor choices that I just want them to go home. But I keep

sitting there, our chairs stuck close to each other. Once a discussion is over, our knees knock against each other. We have to huddle thus to hear because everybody speaks in a low voice. It wouldn't matter if we didn't hear each other. I already know their stories.

The little girl, maybe six years old, comes with her teddy bears and talks about the time when her parents divorced and she got to choose where to live. She moved to a new house with her mother. Mother had promised her a bike if she moved with her. She should've chosen father, but she wanted to have the bike. Her father died soon after they'd moved apart, of a broken heart. If only she'd stayed with father. Women are stronger anyway and mother would've survived. The little girl keeps crying every night, and I cannot bear her tears. I want her to be carefree and happy, but she keeps organizing her bears in her lap over and over and makes me shiver.

The teenager talks about smoking. Every night she comes to talk about the same summer day when she and her friend had found a pack of cigarettes in front of a pub and had gone behind a woodshed and sat there until both had learnt to inhale properly. It had taken a bit more effort from her, but she had finally learned it. She should never have picked that pack of cigarettes and gone to buy matches. She should've just passed the pack and walked to the library where she'd first planned to go with the friend. But their steps had led behind the woodshed. Their skipping and hopping away to the shed suffocates me, but there's nothing I can do to stop that.

The third visitor is in her forties but she looks a lot older. With a husky voice, she talks about the day she left her son.

After divorcing her husband, she had not wanted her son to lose his father like she had lost hers. So she had just walked away from the son. Only once did she turn back. She had tried to take her son to the park to talk to him. But having to face the husband who wanted to get rid of her was too much. She left and never took her son to the park or anywhere else again. She should've taken care of him, but she left him like he'd been something meaningless to be thrown away. That should never have happened. But it did, because she just kept putting one foot in front of the other until she'd vanished from her son's view. The son's alarmed gaze burns on my back while the woman talks.

Always after the three visitors leave, for temporary relief, I go out to the hospice terrace. My turbid green eyes stare at the lake.

Tonight, I don't stare at the lake. I haven't seen my father or son for decades, but now he stands right there in front of me on the terrace. I'm not sure which one the man is, but I think it's them both mingled together. I try to stand up straight and cough an apology, but words fail me. He keeps looking at the lake without turning.

My father, my son and the fresh summer air. Now I won't walk away from either. I hold on to them, the most beautiful people they are, as I slowly drift away from everything else.

A Paradise

by Tiina Ojamo

Emily was feasting her eyes on the scenery. The late afternoon sun beamed over their summer house, the trim garden and the perfectly calm lake. She breathed in the sweet smell, a mixture of roses, sirens and pink peonies. The floral perfume and the singing of blackbirds and a persistent chaffinch reminded her of where she was. Otherwise it was as if she had just stepped into a brilliant picture. Everything was perfect in their paradise where nothing and nobody could distract them. If only she could stop time and freeze this enchanting view.

‘Would you care for a glass of wine? Or shall I cut you a slice of the rhubarb pie I made in the morning?’ She turned to look at Marc, her husband of the past fifteen years.

Every time Emily watched Marc or thought about him she felt the familiar flash of infatuation. Her husband was tall, dark and handsome. He was also an extremely kind and gentle companion. Marc was both educated and intelligent. A professor of English literature. Emily’s friends kept telling her she had married the perfect gentleman.

‘A glass of wine would be nice, thank you. I’d like to taste the pie with some whipped cream a bit later.’ Marc sat down in a wicker armchair and shifted himself towards the oval table.

‘Shall I bring you anything else? Today’s paper? A book?’ She moved into the house from the balcony where they had been standing a while waving good bye to their guests.

‘Actually yes, if you don’t mind. There is a pile of papers on my desk. I was in the middle of marking some term papers when Philip and Joanna popped in. I might just as well finish the job tonight.’

She filled two crystal glasses with white wine. On Marc’s desk she found an unusually fat term paper: “Transcendentalism in the Early Poems of Ralph Waldo Emerson.” Emily spotted the name of the student at the bottom of the cover page and froze. Suddenly she found it difficult to breathe. She flipped through the pages as if looking for something. Triumphant and nauseous at the same time, she read the tiny handwritten words and initials on the last page: *Wed, same place, same time, C.R.* With difficulty Emily managed to control herself. She put the glasses and the student paper on a tray and picked up a book from the kitchen table.

‘Here you are, darling. I think I’ll join you and have a look at the splendid book on botanical drawings I found in the library.’

Emily was sipping her wine and staring at the exquisite multi-coloured drawings of roses. ‘Shall I compare thee to a Burnet rose?’ he had started his Shakespearean proposal to her. They had met while attending a poetry summer workshop. After a fascinating fortnight in June, reading, reciting and writing poems they had become inseparable—

perhaps even turned into poetical characters, she mused later.

For most of her life she had identified with Emily Dickinson. In her teens, she had been both excited and comforted to have found such a kindred spirit. She thought that she shared the poet's experience of living in a private world that no one else could comprehend. To an outsider this would have seemed only natural since their lives in fact resembled each other in several details. Unexpectedly, then, Marc had entered her world. The poems he had chosen to read and analyse in the workshop had made him seem both solitary and close to nature. Emily liked to imagine they shared a profound sense of union with the universe.

The wedding took place amid roses the following midsummer. It had come as a surprise to many. Some had been shocked to find out that she was eleven years older than her fiancé. Others had been and still were appalled at his choice of such an ordinary looking, dull woman for a wife. Most of the wedding guests shared the opinion that the world was full of more suitable, in other words, more beautiful and interesting ladies. Emily was not making any effort to prove them wrong. She was somewhat shocked to find herself getting married. The poet, her role model and idol, had remained single. Was she making the wrong choice? If only she hadn't been so much in love.

Emily glanced at Marc who seemed to be dozing off. The paper he had been reading had dropped on the floor. What was it her friend Joanna had wanted to tell her this afternoon? She had asked about Marc's lectures and seminars Marc's been rather busy with meetings and engagements lately, hasn't he? Did the name Claire Redford say anything to her? Oh yes, Emily knew exactly where she was getting at.

Joanna was trying to warn her, of course. Somehow she could not appreciate her concern. This was not the first time she had been forced to jealousy and jealous acts. She often found herself near paranoid imagining her husband having affairs with beautiful women of his own age. Occasionally, on purpose or not, a friend or a relative let out something that gave her a fright. She had spent sleepless nights and anxious days spying on Marc and on girls and women he might have had anything to do with. Once she had really made a fool of herself. She had insisted on giving a lift to a German Sabine living next door. At the time she had imagined Marc together with her. As they reached the town centre, Emily burst out and asked the puzzled girl whether she understood that Marc was *her* husband and that they loved each other. Sabine had given her a funny look and thanked her for the lift.

A hardly perceptible breeze tinkled the wind chimes on the porch. The sudden wave of sickness and dizziness had left Emily. Marc was still asleep. She felt calm and energetic when she entered the kitchen to prepare their evening meal. This time she decided to add an extra ingredient into their supper. She fetched a green bowl full of false morels from the cellar. A moment later she was setting the table in front of her drowsy husband. Two vegetable smoothies and two slices of rhubarb pie with whipped cream. Emily leaned back in her chair and closed her eyes. She felt happy and relaxed, dreaming and reciting quietly one of their favourite poems:

*“Thou wast that all to me, love,
For which my soul did pine—
A green isle in the sea, love,
A fountain and a shrine ...”* (*)

(*) ‘To One in Paradise’ by Edgar Allan Poe

The Buccaneer

by Jere Rantalainen

Then I saw it. I had been gazing into the horizon for days, and it finally caught my eye. A ship. But this wasn't just any ordinary ship. No, this was one of the three ships owned by the British Crown that had sailed out of Frazer Hog Cay no longer than a month ago. I had heard from my contacts that one of these ships had a very precious cargo, and I was going to claim it. My crew and I had had enough misfortunes already, and it was high time to settle the score once and for all. Although I was a Spaniard myself, I had nothing personal against "the Crown." I just acted like any pirate would, murder and steal, regardless of ethnicity. This was the only life I knew, and I wasn't going to spend it being poor and kneeling to others. No, I would be the greatest pirate captain ever, and this was to be the greatest achievement yet in my career.

I drank the last drops from my bottle and threw it to the vast ocean. The bitter flavor of rum filled my mouth and my whole existence. I started to yell orders to my crew.

'Ready yourselves, men!' I shouted. 'Our patience has

been rewarded as we'll be taking over the ship we've been hunting all this time! For a month we have been sailing this rugged ship, and now the day has come for you to take what is rightfully yours!

'Aye, captain!' my crew shouted in unison over the waves banging against the sides of the ship.

'Today,' I continued, 'today we shall claim the great treasure on board that ship. We'll show no mercy, 'cause there's no mercy to us either!'

'Aye, captain!' The crew yelled even harder, and I could feel their spirits rising. All the misery and long, hard days, seemed now forgotten and hope filled everyone's mind as we were closing in on our target.

We were only a few minutes away from battle and tension was rising. Nobody admitted it, but all men were nervous, some more than others. Waves kept roaring, rocking the ship from side to side as we got ready to engage.

'All men to battle stations!' I roared. 'Ready the starboard cannons! Don't fire until ordered to!'

We were much better armed than our enemy, and our fighting spirit couldn't get any higher. I reached for my powder bag and loaded my gun swiftly and shouted from the bottom of my heart:

'FIRE!'

My command was passed down the decks until all our cannons hauled metal to our enemy.

Our enemy wasn't ready for such a brutal engagement. Theirs was a lightly armed ship, and we soon got the upper hand. They were totally out of position as I took a shot, killing one of their officers. Without their officers' orders, they couldn't do anything as a unit.

‘Typical British sailors,’ I sneered, ‘and their constant urge for orders.’

Wood splinters were flying everywhere as our cannons shattered everything before them. We’d been out of action for so long, but now we were fighting as if we’d been practicing for it all along. My men were accurate shots and seemed always to find their mark, and enemies were dropping like flies.

Finally, my men managed to toss their grappling hooks across to the other ship. Bodies started piling as we crushed the enemy, and the battle was over as swiftly as it had begun. We gathered enemy survivors and threw them into a brig. My men were cheering and celebrating and dancing around the deck, and making plans for their share of the treasure, whiskey, women and all other generic pleasures that could wash away the memory of this voyage.

Suddenly the first mate came from below decks with a look on his face that gave me a jolt. He kept running around the deck, fussing something about betrayal and a wasted trip. Our little party quieted down, and the men turned to stare at the first mate, who seemed shocked.

‘Iverson, what's the meaning of this outburst?’ I demanded of my first mate. ‘Why are ye clouding our thoughts on this glorious day? And what betrayal?’

‘Captain, there’s no treasure on the ship, only rum.’

‘What? Only rum?’

‘Aye, captain. I searched everywhere. This must be the wrong ship.’

I followed Iverson below the deck and couldn’t believe what I saw. He was right. There was no gold, no object of any value. Only rum. Hundreds of casks and cases of it. It

sure glimmered like gold, but this gold would not fill our pockets. Only our heads and stomachs.

How was this possible? I was so sure that this was the ship with real gold in it. We had been following the wrong damn ship all along. All this waiting, for nothing. How could I ever explain this to my crew? This wasn't the first setback we had encountered, and the men would surely mutiny for this. My career as a pirate captain might be shorter than I expected.

I grabbed a bottle from the nearest case and told Iverson to inform the men. I slumped down on a small keg with the rum now to allay my misery. I opened the bottle and let the bitter liquid fill my head. Sinking slowly into a drunken stupor, I kept hoping I'd still be captain on waking up. If I did.

One Last Trip

by Rebecca Sauerborn

John watched silently as the wind rippled the surface of the lake glowing in silvery hues at the approaching dusk. Or was it already dawn? He had difficulties in mid-summer telling dusk from dawn.

He stood on the veranda of the summerhouse, closed his eyes and listened to the cheerful sounds of his family and friends. Ordinarily they would have inspired a smile, but now it was just noise. So too the smell of the lake, of the summer flowers, trees and smoked fish would have filled him with joy, but now it was mere stink.

He loved this time of the year, of people rejoicing in the daylit nights, full of life and good cheer.

‘John?’ Liv’s voice jolted him out of his thoughts. Her hand on his shoulder made him shiver and he took a few steps away from her. Her touch and closeness were now unbearable—after what she had begged him to do.

‘Janne and I will leave soon,’ she broke the awkward silence embracing the two. ‘Have you decided?’

He folded his arms in front of his chest, the strain making his teeth gnash. She was so calm as to make his blood boil. She had certainly made up her mind, an irrevocable decision presented to him as a *fait accompli*.

In the corner of his eyes, he saw Liv step to his side. He turned slightly to watch her glare at the lake until she moved and looked at him. His heart clenched as it had done since the day she lost that twinkle in her eyes, the twinkle of fullness of joy and life that had made him fall in love with her. It was gone along with the healthy rosy colour of her skin. The face that had put so many smiles on his was now lined with pain.

‘So, you really want to go through with it?’ His voice trembled.

Her eyes remained steady, unhesitant, when she answered with a simple but determined ‘Yes!’

The lump in his throat grew immediately and his fingertips clawed his upper arms. He turned around to the peaceful lake to escape her painful appearance. ‘I cannot believe that you just give up,’ suddenly burst out of his mouth.

‘You are right, I am giving up. I am giving up the pain!’

John turned around and shouted, ‘you are giving up life!’

‘Life? Do you call this a life worth living?’ she asked crestfallen. He couldn’t answer. No answer was the right one. If he said, no, such life was not worth living, he would acknowledge her decision. If he said, yes, he would lie and she would know it. She could always tell when he was lying.

This was no longer a life. She was dying, a little bit more every day with pain written all over her face. He barely slept these days, too afraid to wake up next to her lifeless body. They, that was no longer Liv and John. They, that was: Liv

and John, her disease and the medicine, her pain caused by both, his pain at helplessly watching her dying. Nevertheless she was still on his side, had even some good days, when the pain was an eight instead of a ten.

‘I am not ready to let you go!’ he finally confessed.

She smiled sadly, rested her hands on his cheeks and whispered, ‘I know, but don’t you see that I am already leaving? Every day I am losing a bit more of myself and soon there’ll be nothing left. Only an empty shell!’

‘I will be there for you! I will care for you!’

‘I know, but I don’t want that for you! I saw my grandfather die over months. And it was not only his helplessness or his pain that I couldn’t bear. I watched my grandmother, my father and his brothers care and nurse him. I saw how they changed when the strong man they had known all their lives disintegrated in front of their eyes, became a human wreck, who no longer had any say about his own life.’

He bent forward to kiss her. His forehead rested on hers and his arms pulled her close. He realized how he had thought of her just giving up, just thinking about herself with no thought of what it meant to him. But in truth she had thought about him. He had not understood why Janne, her own brother, had immediately agreed to take her side and support her plan. Now he saw why his best friend did not try to talk her out of it. Janne was on Liv’s side, had seen their grandfather dye and how it had affected everyone around.

‘Okay, let us go!’ John’s words were hushed, and he felt a shiver run from head to feet.

They walked to the summer kitchen, where their families and friends were eating, drinking and laughing. Janne was already busy putting their stuff in the boat, while Liv and

John said their goodbyes. John watched Liv hug her little niece and saw tears gather in the little girl's eyes.

Eeva, Liv and Janne's mother came to John and hugged him. She had always hugged him but this time it felt different. The hug was tighter, and when she released him, she was crying. 'Bring my little girl back,' she whispered and patted his cheek. He realized that she already knew what was going to happen. Every time they had gone out on their little midsummer trip to the small island she had said, 'Bring my little girl back safe!' The first five years she said this to Janne, and after that she had always addressed him.

This time she omitted the last tiny word. He knew that the siblings hadn't told anyone else of their plan and neither did he, but Eeva knew this was the last time she was talking to her little girl. Since they first met Eeva had always been like a mother to him. Janne had told him once that it had been Eeva's idea to invite the new British classmate after school. He owed her the welcome he'd had as a foreigner, owed her his best friend and the love of his life.

Their goodbyes said, they took the boat to the small island in the middle of the lake, like they always did at midsummer. John started a fire while Liv and her brother pitched up a tent for the night, the same tent they had used since their first trip twenty years ago, when Liv was just ten years old and her big brother promised her an adventurous trip with him and his best friend. Grilling sausages and marshmallows, they sat around the warming fire, talking about everything and nothing.

Lying in John's arms and shaking, Liv watched the sky with squinting eyes. He knew it was time for the morphine. Just as he wanted to ask Janne to get the little bottle out of the

bag, the same got up and grabbed Liv's bag. A little later Janne was kneeling in front of her and opened the bottle with shaky hands. The seal broke and he looked briefly at John, who nodded slightly before he held Liv's head up to help her drink. She emptied the small bottle, squinting at every sip at the bitter taste.

It felt like hours till the bottle was finally empty and Liv let it drop on the ground. She cuddled up to her husband and closed her eyes. He pulled her close, stroking her hair and kissing it. Listening to the slowing down of his wife's heartbeat, John felt his best friend's hand on his shoulder, somewhat unsteady yet supportive.

'I love you!' With these three last words Liv's heartbeat vanished.

The Contract

by Mikko Teuho

It was a rainy day. Neon lights flickered in the streets of Shibuya, the raindrops gave a hissing sound. Steam was rising from the wet masses as Tetsu-Jim was walking briskly among the crowds. His long coat was getting drenched, his shades mirroring the filtered light and rain and the faceless crowds. No one paid much attention to him. He was already late for his appointment and he hated being late. For some reason everyone always reminded him of being late, no matter what.

He had no idea why everyone kept calling him “Jim,” but it suited him well. No one in the business used their real name anyway, too much flak if you revealed your true identity, even to your closest friends. *Tetsu* was good, a hint at his apparent ethnic background and the amount of metal he had implanted in himself. Some even thought that he was more machine than man, but what can you say when both your arms are chromed and wired, with optical circuitry instead of a spinal cord running through your vertebrae?

A street hawker was shouting for a passerby to try his new

foods. Some sort of noodles and extras, couldn't even begin to describe what it was made of. Tasty smelling chow, though. Better remember to stop here once the business was concluded. Could even ask the others to join him.

He approached the classy bar, the Himeji. Modelled after a feudal castle, the entrance was illuminated with a bright light, with a couple of well-dressed bouncers at the door. Usually Tetsu-Jim tried to avoid these places, too much money to fork out even for the simplest drink. At the door, he saw the silhouette of a mountain of a man standing in the shadows, seemingly ignored by the tide of people trying to gain entry into the club. At least they had umbrellas. As Tetsu-Jim came closer, the familiar electrical tattoos shimmered faintly in blue on the man's arms, and he turned his masked face to him. A traditional *menpo* mask; one could hardly see the man's eyes behind it. Coupled with his traditional ninja garb, he gave an aura of dread. Nice touch.

'You're late Jim,' the silhouette rasped.

'I'm always late, *Omae*,' said Tetsu-Jim with a grin. 'I keep wondering how a man of your size with such flashy tattoos can creep up on people.'

The masked one stared through empty holes.

'Is Saint already inside?' Tetsu-Jim asked, hoping to cut the silence.

'She's been there for over an hour. The bouncer will let us in,' the man said, his voice flat and emotionless.

'Better not keep her waiting. Lead the way, Kusari.'

The man moved from the wall and walked effortlessly through the crowd. Impressed, Tetsu-Jim followed, elbowing his way behind him.

The bouncer hardly noticed Kusari moving past him, only

glanced after him when he was already through. But he stopped Tetsu-Jim at the door.

‘You have a pass?’ the bouncer grunted.

‘*Ha*, I’m with him,’ Tetsu-Jim smiled, pointing at Kusari’s back.

‘Then move on. The boss is waitin’ upstairs.’ He gestured to the other bouncer, who whispered something. Subvocal microphones, Dialers, thought Tetsu-Jim. If the bouncers are armed like that, they must be fitted to match any man. And they mean business. Tetsu-Jim followed Kusari through the radiant lobby into the club itself. A typical receptionist came to take his coat, but he waved her off.

The club was filled with an exotic smell and loud music. A bartender was serving drinks to a group of partiers and waitresses strutted around, delivered orders and fetched empty glasses. The dance floor was filled with people dancing in groups and pairs. Catchy tunes. These rich bastards sure know how to party. A stairway was covered by a few expressionless guards, clearly flexing their metallic muscles and giving an air of no-entry-beyond-this-point.

Tetsu-Jim caught up with Kusari, who was single-mindedly heading for an occupied table. Saint was there, her vid-screens showing data and images, cables running through her short hair to her temples and to the top of her spine. Her eyes were glazed. Kusari waited while Tetsu-Jim tapped her lightly on the shoulder. Saint unplugged the cable from her temple, disconnecting herself from the virtual realm and bringing blue back into her eyes.

‘Yo,’ she smiled, blinking. ‘You’re late, Tetsu.’

‘Never heard that before,’ he grumbled. ‘You ready?’

She flashed a grin. ‘I have worked the grid for as long as I

can remember. Leave the worrying to me, *dông ma*.’

‘Just making sure, cutie. Remember, the word is ‘dead’.’

Saint plugged herself back in with a grin, ready to run the net. Having backup is always good, makes things more relaxed during negotiations. Tetsu-Jim walked to the stairway, where the guards frisked him briefly. He was dispossessed of his trusty Remington Silverback.

‘Dangerous streets nowadays, eh?’ he said as the guards took his gun.

‘That’s a beauty,’ said a guard with an eye patch. ‘We’ll hang onto it for a while. Okay, you’re clear to go. Keep walking past the stairs, you can’t miss the boss’s room.’

Kusari joined Tetsu-Jim at the top of the stairs, nodding at him. Convinced that Kusari’s frisking had not been as successful as his, he walked to a pair of great doors, carved of wood. A servant opened the door for them and let them inside a large office, possibly the vastest room Tetsu-Jim had ever been in. A glass wall gave a view over the rainy streets of Shibuya. The music couldn’t be heard there. The servant requested Tetsu-Jim’s coat, which he reluctantly gave, revealing his chromed arms. A guard the size of a small car stood by the door they had entered through, with a few more sitting on chairs around the center of the room. Not a friendly looking bunch, all of them visibly armed. Threatening glances are better than words. The most striking feature in the room was in front of the glass: a huge desk with a man roughly in his forties sitting behind it in the most expensive looking suit you could imagine. A large array of screens and devices spread all over the desk, and the man was hooked to a number of them through cables and wires.

‘Good evening, gentlemen! I’ll be with you in just a

moment,' the man said and turned his attention back to the screens and com-links. Speaking to his colleagues, most likely. Tetsu-Jim sat down in a comfortable looking chair, while Kusari leaned on the wall. His eyes sought out surveillance equipment in the room. He knew that Saint was already watching them. Apparently the conference had ended, for the suit unplugged himself from the cables and turned some of the screens off. His eyes were covered with black, stylish shades.

'You are late,' he said casually.

'Things don't always go as planned,' Tetsu-Jim grumbled.

'True, but I expect professionalism from people I would like to employ,' the man spoke casually. 'It seems that your qualifications are in order. At first glance I knew you are the right men for the task.'

Tetsu-Jim glanced at Kusari. Never could tell if the guy was asleep or focused, but usually it's better to bet on the latter.

'*Ha*. So, who are you and what do you want us to do?' he asked.

The man smiled. 'Good, eager to start. Call me Brian Johnson. Would you like a drink?'

'Sure, why not?'

Mr. Johnson gestured to one of his lackeys, who immediately went to a corner cabinet to pour some drinks. Kusari ignored the offered drink.

'So, what's the job?' asked Tetsu-Jim.

'I need you to infiltrate the facilities of Aegis Systems in Shinagawa,' Mr. Johnson spoke.

'*Okashii*. What're we gonna do once that's done?'

'There is a man called Shinji Arimaki working there, a

scientist who used to work for us. We want this man dead before he spills our secrets to our competitors.’

‘No kidding? How much is the man’s life worth?’ asked Tetsu-Jim with a grin.

‘40 000 N¥ plus expenses. You get 10 000 up front, if you agree to the job.’

Tetsu-Jim looked at Kusari, who nodded.

Tetsu-Jim stood up and walked to Mr. Johnson’s desk and extended his hand.

‘You got yourself a deal, Mr. Johnson. The man is as good as dead.’

There was a sound of locking doors as Mr. Johnson grabbed the hand and shook it. With a hiss, metal slid on metal, and a blade punctured Mr. Johnson’s hand. He cringed in pain and barked at his guards to kill the intruders, but there was no response. Kusari was standing in the middle of the room, a *nodachi* in his hand. He was wiping the blade with a cloth, staining it crimson. Mr. Johnson looked at Tetsu-Jim, his reflection mirrored in Tetsu-Jim’s shades. Mr. Johnson’s face revealed no fear, only anger and fury.

‘You . . . insolent dogs!’ he growled, his hand stuck in Tetsu-Jim’s iron grip. ‘The moment I’m dead the guards outside will know what you’ve done. There’s no way for you to escape.’

A curved blade slid out of Tetsu-Jim’s left arm.

‘Aegis Systems sends you their greetings. It’s nothing personal, just business.’ And the blade came down.

Sounds of running steps came from the door, followed by a crash. Someone was trying to get inside, but the heavy doors would hold for a minute or two. Tetsu-Jim searched Mr. Johnson’s pockets and grabbed the card for the advance

payment. Kusari sheathed his blade, picked up the body of a dead guard and tossed it out of the glass wall, shards raining to the street.

‘That’s a long way down, *Omae*,’ Tetsu-Jim said with a smile. ‘Can you make it?’

‘I have survived longer falls,’ Kusari rasped and jumped down.

Tetsu-Jim shrugged, turned to look at the door crashing in and the guards spilling into the room. They opened fire at first sight, automatic rifles spewing metal. Tetsu-Jim jumped off the window, his metal hands gripping the wall to slow down his descent. Near the street he jumped off and rolled to the wet pavement. The guards kept firing after the escaping figures.

‘Life on the edge,’ Tetsu-Jim grunted. Patrol cars were approaching, the sound of sirens getting closer. Kusari leaned out of the shadows and assessed the situation. People were being herded out of the building. Saint was among them, her cables still attached but apparently the deck turned off.

‘Excellent work,’ said a deep voice further down the alley.

Tetsu-Jim turned towards the voice. A man was standing there, half in the shadows, eyes glowing. No idea if he had company in the darkness, but that was more than likely. And if Tetsu-Jim couldn’t see or sense them, they were good. Most likely he was aimed at from a number of sources.

‘Work is work. Mr. Johnson’s dead. You owe us the rest of the payment,’ he said grinning.

‘Why, of course. That is, after all, why I am here,’ the burning eyes said. A briefcase manifested itself from the shadows. ‘Here is the payment.’

Tetsu-Jim stepped cautiously to the case. Kusari was watching intently, ready to respond to any sudden movement. Tetsu-Jim stopped a few meters from the satchel. The bright eyes followed his every move.

‘I trust we’ll be doing more business together someday?’ the eyes said, a malicious edge to the voice.

‘Could be, if the money’s right,’ said Tetsu-Jim.

‘Very good. I hope you won’t try to betray us. We have surveillance footage of what you did here. Your hacker is good, I give you that, but not that good. If you side with them, remember that this material will find its way to their executives.’

Silence descended in the alley. Tetsu-Jim cursed under his breath.

‘I need not remind you that this conversation did not happen. Don’t try to contact us, we’ll contact you. And we’ll keep an eye on you.’ The glowing eyes shut and the man turned and walked back into the alley.

After a while when footsteps could be heard no longer, Tetsu-Jim picked up the briefcase and turned to Kusari.

‘Looks like we’ll be working together some more, *Omae*,’ he said. ‘Want to grab a bite? I saw a great food stall a few minutes from here. They serve these delicious smelling noodles. I’ll ask Saint to come too.’

The Bridge

Ilkka Tuurala

Lauri had been standing on the bridge all day. Even though it was a warm spring day, he was shivering, from tension. He had no idea how things were, in fact hadn't had a clue for a long time now, and the past few weeks had been just sheer chaos. *On the other hand, what was he supposed to know? He was just a pawn, knew his orders, and that was that.*

He was a member of the Red Guard with a red armband on the left arm of his winter mantle with patched trousers stuffed with woolen socks into old leather boots. No glamorous uniform there. He had been ordered to stand guard at the bridge. If he saw the enemy, he was to hold his position and keep the route open for his own troops, to withdraw if necessary. He had no idea how to accomplish that, and if it came to a clash, he wouldn't have a chance. *They probably even knew that at the headquarters. If there was such anymore.*

He was glad that he was now behind the frontline. In the morning he had been listening to distant artillery fire in the south. A couple of days ago, the artillery had been much

closer, hammering the eastern parts of the town, and heavy fighting had erupted in Kalevankangas. The Whites had fanned out across the graveyard, and he was trying to keep his head down behind the tombstones. When bullets hit stone, shrapnel pinged nasty high notes against the cacophony of screams and shouts. They had managed to prevent the Whites breaking through their lines though. It had now been two days of quiet.

Silence continued. The streets were empty because civilians stayed indoors, hiding in the cellars of stone buildings. He looked down at the railway under the bridge. The central railway station, currently empty, lay to the south, and the railroad tracks cut the town center in half. To the right was Tammela and its wooden working-class neighborhood, or what was left of it. To the left, in the east, was the town center. The pair of rusty tracks lay in a cutting between high stone walls. It was like a moat between workers and the better people.

Lauri kept wondering what he was doing there. He was not very keen on politics, but had enlisted in his home town in Ruovesi mostly because he was of the right age and because his friends had enlisted. Or rather he hadn't enlisted. A relative of his had one day come to visit, had given him a rifle and ordered him to follow. And he had followed, mostly because he had no option.

Yes, he had his reasons as they all did, some more political than others. But they were all seeking justice, more rights and better opportunities in life. He had been working in large farm houses, a woodcutter in winter, a hired hand in summer, wages paid in food mostly. Because no other work was available in the countryside, the only alternative was to

move to town, work in the factories and rent a small room, if you could afford it. *What kind of life was that?*

Already before all this, early one morning, local White Guards who had appointed themselves the local law and order had rushed into his house and dragged him to questioning—just because they knew his brother-in-law was leader in the local labor movement.

They knew very well that he was not involved in local politics nor in the violence flaring out on both sides. They had seated him in a sleigh though, and the journey had begun. He was lucky at questioning in that they thought him simple and stupid and didn't try beating answers out of him. They believed him when he insisted he knew next to nothing about anything. Thinking him illiterate, they felt safe leaving him in the sleigh while they visited a farm house. He knew how to read though, and since he had nothing else to do in the sleigh, he read their plans and letters. *Nothing of real interest though but it helped pass the time.*

He leaned on the stone parapet of the bridge and gently stroked the moss growing on it and wondered at its insistence on staying green through winter and frost. *Now it was light green and soft under the sun. The stone felt cold.*

After enlisting, he had been wandering about with the Red troops, first in Väärinmaja and now in Tampere. In Väärinmaja fighting had made sense. They had been fighting for justice and against the landowners who shared all common good between the few of them and treated the rest as tenants, even those who owned their house but had no field big enough to keep a horse. They had to rent it at heavy toil and be constantly dependent on those who had hundreds of hectares of field. A cow was somewhat easier to keep without

a field since it could be fed by harvesting road sides and reed from the lakes. *How could it be right that those who inherited their land forced generations of neighbors to work for them and increase their welfare, and the gap between them and others?*

Now here in town, men had wandered in from all around for various reasons, or none at all. Lauri had largely lost his faith in the slogans of the agitators and politruks. They were no less bullies than the landowners who lorded it over others. They stayed behind in the headquarters, went on with their propaganda and preached about workers owning all the factories.

Factory workers did not share those thoughts. They spent so much time in factories that factories had become their homes. Most of them just shook their heads at the idea that they might own or manage them. All they wanted was equal rights to build up their lives from out of that work. They even tried to prevent terror against factory buildings and their White managers. Destroyed factories would have meant lost jobs.

But now they were here, and it seemed they were being used for something they did not believe in or want. The regular guys always bore the brunt of any insanity. This was not going to end well, and Lauri had seen enough. It just happened to be All Fools' day now. *How much they all had been fooled! he thought.*

The sun was shining in his eyes. It felt nice but was too bright. He turned around and walked across the street to the north end of the bridge where the railroad tracks branched east and to Naistenlahti, the factory tracks. Behind them spread out Lake Näsijärvi, still covered with ice. An open

lake would provide better protection in siege. But in that weather the lake would soon be free from ice all the way north from where all that water came from. *The only certainty was that summer was on its way.*

He ripped off his armband and left the bridge.

The Doctor

by Iria Villanueva Lires

I was standing there on the terrace of my father's summer house. It was an August afternoon, and I was watching the play of sunlight on the lake. There was a cold wind from the lake. I was hoping it would cool my head and its heated content about my future.

I had just been surprised by the appearance on the terrace by Jacob Newman, the respected doctor friend of my family and somewhat older than me. He now reminded me of people often talking about his strange likes and his friends with weird mindsets and bohemian backgrounds—and that he had never been with a woman.

All just rumor, I thought. No one seemed to know him for real. No one I ever heard had anything to say about his real feelings. He himself never seemed bothered by the rumors—if he ever even minded them. I used to see him more often when I was little, and he never struck me as anything strange then. Just a polite, well-behaved boy. Since then we have met only occasionally, at large family celebrations, like now.

So there we were, on the terrace looking over the lake,

both, by all appearances, seeking to escape the people and the party. Perhaps gossip too. At least I didn't want anyone to see how frustrated I was.

Suddenly, without turning, he whispered to me, 'how well do you know your fiancé?'

I was startled. What was that all about? Certainly not a polite start with a lady you have seldom addressed before! His question shocked me speechless; I didn't know how to respond. Did he imply he knew my fiancé better than I did? Should I tell him the unpleasant truth that my father had arranged the marriage, and that I hardly knew, let alone wanted this fiancé?

'What a question to a lady!' I finally stammered, turning, annoyed, to exit the veranda. But he moved quickly, took me by the elbow and held me. What did he think he was doing! I was getting nervous, expecting something terrible to happen. He must have had too many drinks, flashed through my mind.

I tried to yank my arm free, thought of calling for help, but I had no voice. In my mind's eye the picture of a little child appeared. He held to my elbow, gently but firmly. He raised his head and looked into my eyes, with no clouding in his.

'This is totally inappropriate,' I said in a low voice.

He saw I was nervous and scared, but he didn't let go of me.

'If I released you now, I would never see you again,' he said in a melancholy tone.

His eyes held me mesmerized in their blue, ocean-like depths, dark and dangerous. What was he trying to say? Why was he afraid of losing someone he didn't know? Why was he now here at my engagement party?

‘You have had too much to drink. Let me take you inside where you can sit down,’ I said, trying to sound polite, but really eager to have other people to join us and defuse the situation.

But he stopped me.

‘Please, I’d rather stay out here and enjoy the fresh air and look at the nice view.’ Then he released me, patting my elbow lightly, as if he trusted me not to run away.

I turned to go but his next words stopped me.

‘Wouldn’t you like to be a bird? Then you could see everything from the air, from a new perspective.’

Did he expect me to answer? Did he try to engage me again? I hesitated, thought of how this all would look. If I didn’t answer, someone seeing us on the terrace might misunderstand the situation, might think that I was arguing with him or that I was being rude. After all, he *was* a respected doctor and the only one in our small town. Women would gossip.

‘Sometimes.’

I cannot believe what I did. I should have run away from him.

The Battlefield

By Mahwish Zahra

I was awakened from a dream
by sounds of thunder and scream;
the dream to realize,
oh, my little paradise,
where my love and I
strolled for a while,
where blossoms of spring
abound in tranquility and serenity,
torched by the pernicious and revenant.
My peace, my soul and spirit
for my dream and love
I will sacrifice,
for peace and our future
that we are here to ensure

Ali's wrist watch showed half past midnight as he closed his diary. He turned to Omer, 'I'm going out to get some fresh air.' Omer, his junior officer, nodded and continued to scan the valley through night vision binoculars from their bunker at Michni Post in Kurram Agency, where the Pakistani Army was fighting the Tehreek-i-Taliban terrorists.

Ali stepped out to stroll around the post. It was a beautiful night with everything glowing on the milky sheet of a full moon and a balmy breeze sighing softly over the land. He wandered around, thinking about the war on terror that Pakistan and the world had now been fighting for years with no end in sight. The Michni post was located on Koh-e-Safaid, overlooking Pakistan's western border in Kurram Agency. The mountains were mostly barren with traces of wild shrubs extending to the foothills; the valleys unfolded in lush green fields and natural alignments of trees, which demarcated the boundary between valley and mountains.

Ali was a tallish, witty and high-spirited young man in his late twenties, serving as a captain in the 9th Punjab Infantry Battalion. With beady black eyes, a wheat-brown complexion and a short well-trimmed beard, Ali cut a healthy, handsome figure. Omer, who had joined the battalion a few months earlier, was a shrewd, intuitive and opinionated first lieutenant, plus a professional volleyball player with a sound grip on current affairs.

Omer saw homemade sweets in Ali's hand when Ali returned to the bunker. 'Sir, if Bhabi Jaan¹ has made them for you, then they must be very sweet,' remarked Omer wittingly.

'Yes they are Omer,' said Ali, 'but these are not for me, but for a first lieutenant like you, whose sugar level drops quite a bit in the early months of their posting here.' Laughter filled the air. Ali assumed guard duty for the post and started monitoring the area in front.

Suddenly a massive jolt with a deafening thunder rattled

¹ title given to a brother's or friend's wife

everything.

A volley of anti-bunker rockets hit the post on the side where Omer was standing. The impact knocked Omer and other two soldiers down, and the bunker filled with dust and smoke. Ali recovered in a split second and took stock of the situation. He knew exactly what was coming.

Terrorists had attacked his post. Omer and his company took their positions to return fire on the terrorists, while Ali grabbed the wireless set and passed the message to the battalion's headquarters. The battalion responded: they were to hold the attack till first light. The bad weather at the battalion base hindered supply of any reinforcements until visibility improved. Ali quickly inventoried his resources and prepared a plan while his companions retaliated.

With their limited resources, Ali and his company were now to maintain their position for several hours. The Taliban are known for their guerilla warfare; they always attack with large man-power and material.

After helping with first aid to the injured, Ali summoned his men in groups and explained his plan, 'Keep cool and save your ammo till the terrorists get within a hundred yards of us.' He gave specific orders to each group and concluded, 'It'll be a long night, my soldiers, but we have to stand our ground. Allah-Nigheban.'²

He checked the time on his wrist watch. It was now 3 am. The terrorist kept firing at the post with all available weaponry. He toured the bunkers. The enemy had encircled the post and cut the supply line. With every passing moment their fire intensified, and casualties kept rising at the post.

² God is your protector now

Five out of ten had been wounded so far, Omer among them. After receiving first aid, Omer came to Ali's bunker. The two had been friends since their academy days and had kept in touch after receiving their commissions. The Khurram Agency detail had sealed their friendship.

'Sir, I want to have permission to occupy the front post,' Omer asked, seating himself next to Ali.

Ali knew it was a death sentence. 'I can't give you permission; I have already lost too many soldiers.'

'With this amount of ammo we are already sitting ducks. You know that holding our ground is getting difficult.' Omer argued. 'With this new plan we would surprise them and hold them back for a while longer.'

Omer's argument convinced Ali, and he allowed Omer and his two soldiers to occupy the forward post, fifty yards to the right and front. As the terrorist closed in, Omer and his men opened fire from an unexpected angle, killing a good dozen of the attackers.

The exchange of bullets and rockets continued with the terrorist inching closer to the post. A bullet pierced Ali's wrist, breaking his wrist watch at around 4 am. He received medical aid and returned to his position to provide back-up to Omer and his men. But the terrorists eventually overcame Omer's post. Suddenly there was no fire from the post, and then Ali heard shots from inside the bunker. Omer and his two men were killed by the terrorists. Ali stopped for a moment to salute Omer's valiant effort. Now, he was left with only two soldiers, a machine gun, three rifles and two hundred rounds.

The Taliban crawled closer.

Ali knew the situation was getting critical. A terrorist

bullet killed yet another soldier, and Ali glanced in grief as Shareef took his last breath. But there was no time to stop or think. The enemy was approaching fast. He and his last soldier sprayed bullets in an attempt to reduce the Taliban numbers.

Despite heavy casualties, the terrorists pushed on. Taking the post was crucial to them as it overlooked their movements to Afghanistan. From there they could also attack American troops across the border. In renewed waves, they flew themselves against the post to capture it.

Shot through the chest, Ali's last soldier collapsed near him. Ali was now alone, injured and with one magazine of ammunition. The terrorists geared up for a final onslaught. Ali steadied his nerve, holding to his ammunition till the enemy closed to within fifteen yards of the badly damaged post. Silently and once again, he pledged his life for the sake of his dream, a terrorist-free Pakistan, where he and his family could live in peace with honor and dignity.

Of the last wave of terrorists he killed all except two. Out of ammunition, he could no longer hold his position. He had no choice but to engage the last of them head on. Crouching he moved out of the bunker, injured and exhausted but with enough energy and spirit to kill the last two terrorists. In his mind he kept repeating 'last man, last bullet.' Without giving the two time to open fire, he jumped on them, yelling 'Allah ho Akber.' Surprised, the terrorists lost their rifles in the tumble. Ali had been the best boxer in the academy. Now his skills came in handy in close combat. Even with one usable fist, steeled with rage and one last shot of adrenaline, he managed to knock down his adversaries.

He laid the bodies of his men in rows outside the post,

wiped their faces with his handkerchief and prayed for them. He could not decide whether it was a victory or defeat. They had held their ground at the cost of their young lives.

Reinforcements arrived in helicopters after first light. Ali was evacuated along with the dead bodies of his company. Ali's wife and mother received him on the helipad, their eyes filled with tears of joy and hearts with pride over of his bravery. He was driven to the hospital while the dead bodies of his company were flown to their villages. Sometime later, Ali and his family attended Omer's funeral; he was buried with full military honors. For their action and valor, Ali and Omer were awarded a Sitara-e-Jurrat.³

His martyred companions had laid their lives for a cause, and Ali requested his commanding officer that their Michni Post be named Peace Post. The request was granted and implemented. Later at a ceremony at the post, Ali set to its gate a stone engraved with PEACE in red.

³ award for gallantry and distinguished services performed in combat

Stefanie Kohlhoff

S raphine de Senlis

S raphine, you saw flowers glow
and bushes burn;
You saw angels in the wind
and god in every leaf and tree.
Beauty streamed out of you
in the long hours of the night,
while others slumbered away their imagination . . .

An eye overlooking the water
observes the observer
and holds him accountable

A Fact of Life

I hate to say this. . .
but we're out of milk.
And cheese, and bread.
There are no vegetables either.
The house should have been cleaned weeks ago.
No clean socks?
I do apologize!

But everything just had to wait,
while I ran out into the rain

and danced among the puddles.
Everything just had to wait,
while I jumped into the lake after a long winter
and made a princess cake out of sand.

(Want to have some?)

Everything definitely had to wait,
while I crawled through the summer fields,
playing hide-and-seek with the cows,
and discussed the weather with the ants.

You just can't have everything,
no matter how hard you try.

Caught in the Moment

I had been watching you for a while, as you stood there at
the bus stop,
looking intently in the direction of the bus that was to
arrive soon.

You were so small and fragile, with your heavy backpack
and a raincoat tucked under your arm.

Your right hand was clenched, probably on the fare for the
bus.

I wondered whether it was your first time travelling alone,
for you seemed tense.

I thought of your parents, who probably were just as
tense,
nervously waiting to see how your maiden voyage would
turn out,

and whether everything went well.
Maybe somebody was already at the other end
waiting to see you alight from the bus
and be safe again.

It started to rain.
Droplets trailed the bus shelter glass.
The street emptied suddenly, and no one was there to see
the unbearable temptation . . .
that took me to you . . .
made me wrap my arms around you . . .
press my hand on your mouth . . .
Your fare fell to the ground when I picked you up.
You were so light! It took me only a moment to whisk you
away to my car.

Later, I made myself an omelet and watched some TV,
until I fell into a deep and peaceful sleep.

I'm feeling much better now.

Anna Nykänen

Encounter

I enter the room,
filled with familiar scents, sweet air.
After years of longing,
out of nowhere again
I can sense your silky hair.

Your closeness and warmth
drive away my fears;
then you fade away again
and leave me alone in my tears.

Runaway, 1-3

1. Decision

It's time to conquer fears and past,
to see how long I will last.
Should I make up something large,
or join in on a freaky march?

Maybe I will brave a storm,
or growl with cats from dusk to dawn.
Now I know! In terror, sweat,
I'd like to test how far I get.
I start training nightly out,
and soon I hear the shot ring loud!

2. *Action*

As we start, my little toe
gets from another's heel a blow,
yet I elbow for a spot,
though by now I need a shot.

Sweating gallons and in pain,
God, I might just burst a vein;
pressure twisting neck and thigh,
I hope, I pray that I could fly.

With legs all jelly and so sore,
and body battered to the core,
I keep on running for my life,
a crazed, ambitious, flipping wife.

3. *Outcome*

The final flap, thank God, no tangles,
or busted sinews, broken angles.
I reach the bannered finish line,
for victory that's all now mine.

The marathon is over now,
I'm pooped out like a tired cow,
in my fancy running pants,
my family my only fans.

The escapade though got me nowhere,
since now I'm back again in there,
dawdling in the same old home,
at least I got some time alone.

Tiina Ojamo

The Seven Last Words

Today's news,
nothing out of the usual:
sanctions, war and destruction.
I should get a grip
to face the day.

I choose Haydn,
for consolation perhaps,
and succumb
to the Paraclete of the final sonata.

Pater, dimitte illis, quia nesciunt, quid faciunt.

Conceptual Jail

He asks me why I need my freedom,
for a means or for an end?

Is there a difference?

Do I attain my dreams
or control my destiny,
out of responsibility or neurosis?
What if I confuse freedom with power?

A mere play with words,
conceptualizing the obvious
and making it ambiguous.

Does *Tractatus* have the key for the state of affairs?

I could go as well with nonsense,
patent or disguised.

Lishnii chelovek

In the world of business controllers,
communication directors,
sector managers, chief economists,
financial experts and executive officers,

I remain undisturbed
and, for most, unexamined.

I never left in defeat or quivered from fright,
just grew weary
of the trivia of economic growth.

Had I the energy, I would pray
for strength to strive and struggle,
to make a difference and change something.

Not that I lack plans,
the scholar of my dreams and nightmares.
But the context is so absurd and false
to explain who and what I might be
—and superfluous anyway.

Mikko Nurminen

KIE-34306 Creative Writing

In class we sit 'n talk 'n learn about writin',
short stories 'n poems from the teacher's errin',
and we read to get som' of dat sweet inspiration
and we write, oh! the sweet moment of creation.

In the sound castle built by teachers and writers past,
we stand in a tower and try to write something to last,
gazing far into the hazy horizon, we see flowing forms,
our tales dance there finding shapes amid storms.

Balanced

Algorithm, you self-balancing tree,
I study your workings in wonder.
You certainly are not like me,
in your balanced splendor.

Yet over you I prevail.
I could make you disappear.
You're just a technical detail,
I, the king of the heap to reverse.

