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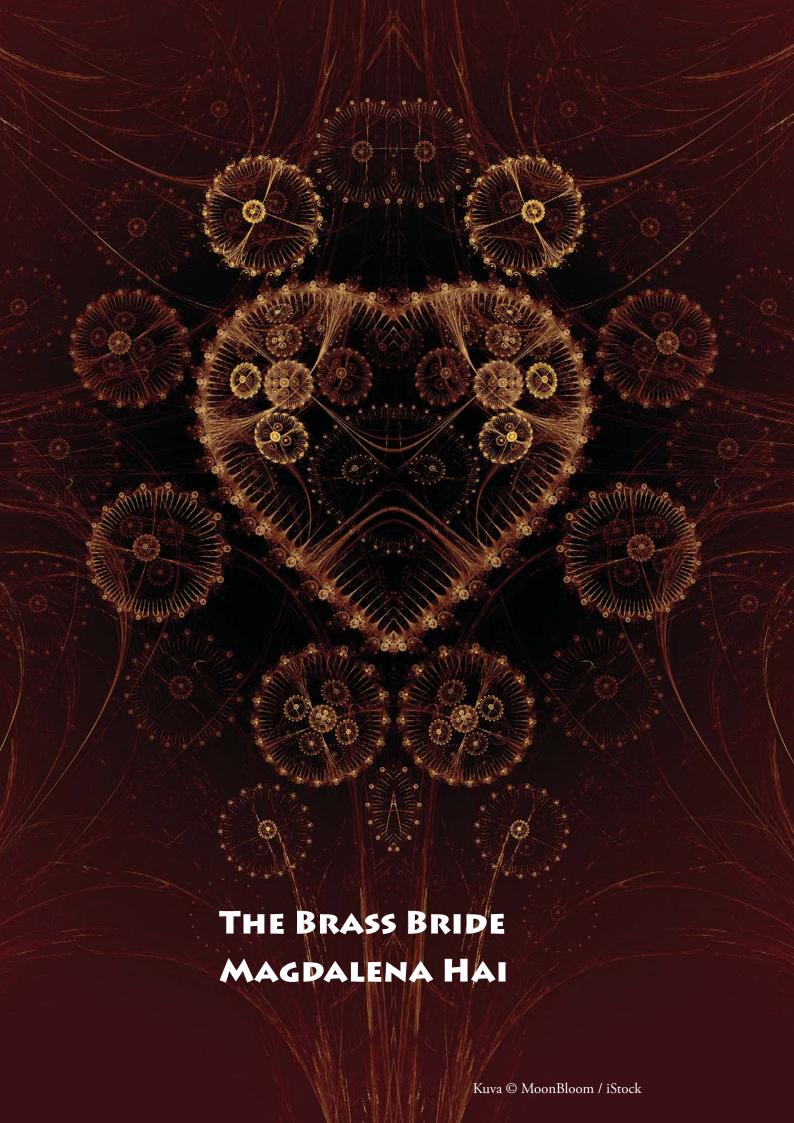
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Usva (The Mist if you translate it) is a brand new fanzine, started in 2005. It's main goal is to publish Finnish speculative fiction in Internet - for free. The speculative element should be undestood here broadly: science fiction, fantasy, horror, surrealistic and absurd stories. Usva is doing it's best to narrow down the existing gap between mainstream prose and sf-/fantasy genres.



t was an early evening, a tad after nine, when my brother's fiancée, Miss Lisbeth Duvarney, fell to her death from the third floor balcony of our country house. The year was 1882. I remember that particular evening as one of those soft July nights when the heat, sunk in the walls during the day still warmed the air, and the cicadas still sung in the rose bushes of the garden. We had spent the day outside, playing cricket and admiring one of the Royal Gregorovian Dirigible Company's air ships. Its massive coin-shaped envelope had created a strange shadow over our game.

At sunset we had returned to the house. My brother Ichabod had been drinking before he came to dinner. Lisbeth had cried. Afterwards Lisbeth invited me to her room. She was furious, half mad. Like a wild cat she stomped around the room, twisting her fan in her hands, telling me she would never marry Ichabod. Not when she could marry me. She tried in vain to talk me over.

Much later we found her mangled body lying on the grey stones of the verandah. The moss growing between the slates – the moss that our gardener Stokes in vain had tried to get rid of – was soaked in red. In the light of the lanterns the large, gleaming pearls of blood that stuck to the soft parts made it look like the plant itself were thirsty for it. Ichabod remained in the shadows, wrapped in his arms, swaying silently as he stood.

The family doctor arrived soon enough and covered Lisbeth's body with a sheet, uttering the mandatory words: "I am sorry. She is gone."

Ichabod closed his eyes. His head twitched, like he had been hit.

I did not try to comfort him.

"We have to move her," I said. "I will call Stokes."

"No." Ichabod's voice was ragged. His eyes glared when he said: "I will do it myself. I don't want anyone else to touch Lisbeth. None other should do it but me."

I ignored the look he gave me. "Do as you best see fit, brother."

Next morning Ichabod left the village in a rented wagon. He headed for the city with Lisbeth's remains. Three days later I received a letter from him, saying:

Thaddeus,

by the time you receive this letter, our dear Lisbeth is resting in her family's crypt at the North Grimstone graveyard. The funeral was a modest affair, with only some of her closest friends and Mr. and Mrs. Duvarney present. I did not tell Lisbeth's parents the details of her death. They stay blessed with the knowledge that it was an unfortunate accident.

I did not invite you for reasons you yourself are best aware of.

Ichabod

After reading my brother's letter I sat in the library until day turned into early evening and Wilford came to close the windows. July had ended and turned into August. Slowly waning sunlight revealed the bare spots on the verandah where Stokes had finally peeled away the blood-stained moss.

I recalled the day Ichabod introduced us. My brother's fiancée had been a beautiful sort of a woman, in her own peculiar way. The early summer sun had tanned her skin. Freckles had appeared on her face. They were to be found elsewhere on her body too. Right above her collar bone. All over the sensitive skin of her breasts. On her inner thighs. When I had made love to her for the first time, I had followed the freckles on her body with my fingers like a child playing "connect the dots". It had made her shiver with pleasure.

She had wondered at the warmth of my hands. Her own hands were always so cold.

I could claim that I loved Lisbeth, and thus make myself a better man. I could claim that I did everything in my power to save her — or even that her death touched me at all. But the truth is, those weeks following Lisbeth's passing I spent as usual, handling the matters of our family estate, hardly thinking about my brother's ordeal.

It was only after a month that I heard again from my brother. Ichabod had a habit of drowning his sorrows into work, so I presumed he had been delving into his studies in Ashborough Technical University. It was early September, when I next saw him. My own duties had taken me to the city. I was walking along Hart's Lane, towards the Clockmaker's Quarter, when my journey was interrupted, as I was jostled by a dastardly man

carrying a large brown parcel.

"Excuse me, sir, do look ahead!" I bellowed.

"Pardon me," he muttered. "I did not see You, I was..."

The man's appearance was so shoddy and pitiful that I would not have expected to encounter such in the better parts of Ashborough. But it was not until the man lifted the corner of his hat that I realized – to my horror – that it was my brother.

"Ichabod! For God's sake, what has happened to you?"

My brother's reddened eyes wandered restlessly along my face and collar. It was as if he looked but did not want to see me. He adjusted his parcel and seemed to reach a decision. Jutting his chin he said: "Thaddeus. It's nice to meet you. How have you been?"

"Ichabod..." I grabbed his wrist. "You look awful. Have you been drinking again?"

Ichabod seemed to hesitate. I saw his lip quiver. "What does it matter to you, even if I have? What does it..." His face sagged. "I need to go."

He yanked his sleeve from my grip. Before he disappeared in the crowd he wiped his mouth hastily with the back of his hand and spat out: "This is your fault, all of it."

This peculiar meeting made me worry for my brother. I decided to abandon my tasks for the day and took instead the first available steambeetle to the apartment of our mutual friend John Reston. For years John had been one of the closest friends of the family. He would know with certainty what had happened to my brother during the weeks following Lisbeth's death.

As we reached John's house I tapped the beetle driver on his shoulder with the tip of my umbrella and asked him to halt the blasted engine.

With a loud hiss the beetle lowered itself to street level. I clambered out and paid the driver. The man touched the brim of his cap, turned on his seat to order the shovel boy to chuck more coal into the furnace, and slowly raised the beetle back on its feet. Joints of heavy mechanics groaned as the machine stood. It creeped towards the other beetles travelling up and down the street and vanished among them. I shook my head. Contrary to my technically oriented brother, I had always felt reserved towards most of the

advances made lately in the field of engineering. The almost-life of the insect-like engines abhorred me. I could not embrace them.

John was surprised to see me but invited me swiftly enough to his study.

As my host poured me a glass of brandy I asked: "John, tell me... What is the matter with my brother?"

John swirled the honey-colored liquid in his glass. He offered me a cigar. I declined.

"I met Ichabod today in the Artisans' Quarter," I said. "The man looked possessed. Dear God, John, he is my brother."

John lit the cigar, leaned back in his chair and looked at me with a serious expression on his face. "Truth be told, I myself have been worried about Ichabod. Well, all of us have," John said. "After Lisbeth's funeral he disappeared. He stopped coming to the club and, to my knowledge, he has not attended a single lecture since the start of the semester."

I let the brandy slither down my throat. It made me remember the touch of Lisbeth's cool fingers. The memory disturbed me.

John continued. "I heard he rented a workshop from Knightsbridge industrial district. He says he is building his diploma work there. I have only seen him briefly, passing on the street."

"Is he smoking opium?" I asked. John shook his head. "I do not think so."

"What is the matter then?"

"God knows, for I do not." John stared into his glass. Then he looked back at me. "But he does not seem to get over the death of his bride. He still mourns the girl."

I left John soon after. The enormous weight of passing steambeetles shook the street. The bitter smoke and coal dust they poured out of their bellows made the very air smell disgusting. I took the next rental wagon passing by, an old-fashioned horse-drawn carriage. I placed a handkerchief on my mouth and ordered the driver to head to North Grimstone graveyard.

The carriage left me next to the graveyard's tall, black iron gates. After a few misses and turns I found the Duvarney family crypt on the south side of the area. Lisbeth's name shone brighter than the rest on the copper plate affixed to the door of the crypt.

Lisbeth Katherine Duvarney, born 23rd September 1863, died 28th July 1882.

I recalled the letters and small notes slipped from under my door. Lisbeth had started writing them soon after our first, almost accidental rendezvous in the garden of the country house. Rapidly written words, childlike confessions – more amusing than touching. I had burned the notes in my fireplace, but continued my affair with my brother's fiancée nevertheless. My ego had been caressed by her unbridled passion. I just had not guessed its depth. I had thought that her feelings would wane as soon as she realized what sort of a man I really was.

Dew was concentrating into large wet patches on the mossy walls of the crypt and I found myself toying with the idea that Lisbeth's life would have continued after that ill-fated July evening. Had I chosen differently, would I have been markedly less happy a man than I was now? Would life with Lisbeth really have turned out as unbearable as I had thought when I had declined her?

I felt the cool, misty air rising from the graves around me, slithering inside my sleeves. I stood before the crypt and did not know why I had come.

I heard a cough next to me.

"It's grand, innit?" An old graveyard gardener was leaning on a shovel close by. "Not like them new ones. All kinds of so called 'statues' they put on them. Phinxes." Man sucked his teeth. "They say they bring them all the way from Egypt."

I nodded briefly. The old man was, it seemed, one of those irritatingly talkative common folk, who mistakenly thought that old age gave them the privilege to address anyone they liked. I hoped that my silence would make him leave, but the man only took a more comfortable position leaning on his shovel.

"Just tell me if I disturb," he said, clearly not meaning a word of it. "Know them, do you?" He nodded towards the crypt.

"A distant acquaintance" I said, not willing to reveal more.

"The Duvarney family," he pondered aloud. "Have been putting their dead there for a hundred years, at least. Very nice old family. No complaints."

The gardener pulled an old battered pipe from his

pocket and started to fill it like he had all the time in the world. "Weird thing though, that last one," he said. "The girl."

"What do you mean?"

Man lit the pipe and looked at me with cunning eyes. "They buried an empty coffin. Well, empty from corpses, that is." Man took the pipe on his palm and puffed smoke from his mouth in rhythmic, sinister clouds. "I heard there was something shady concerning the girl's death. I would not go spreading such, but they say that the girl topped herself right off. Even then, though, one would think, such an old family would show mercy before judgement. Apparently they wanted to cover up the thing."

"How do you know this?"

"Oh well, things need to be done. When the ceremony is over, me and the boys arrange the flowers all nice and pretty and carry the coffin to its place. After all these years we have come to know when there is a cadaver in the coffin and when there's only sticks and stones. The shifting is different."

Man sucked his pipe and said: "But we don't talk none. Gentry's matters are their own. Why would we hassle with them?"

"Why indeed," I said with a bitter tone. "Perhaps you should continue with your work now and leave the decent folk in peace?"

Man stood up straight, took his pipe from his mouth and rubbed his bearded chin. "Oh well, you see, I am here all day with the dead. Poor talking companions they are. But if I am not good enough for the gentleman..." He grabbed the shovel and swung it on his shoulder. "I cannot be blamed, can I?"

I knew my brother had been responsible for the arrangements of Lisbeth's funeral. Now I was afraid that he had done something truly ill-considered. Could he have been so possessive of his fiancée that he did not want to share her with anyone? Not even the girl's parents? Not even in death?

I walked in the shadow of the graveyard wall towards the main gate. I searched my pockets until I found the note John Reston had given me. It held the address of Ichabod's landlady. The apartment was within a walking distance from North Grimstone.

Ichabod had of course guessed that something had happened between Lisbeth and me, though he didn't

know for sure. As a younger brother Ichabod had been painfully aware that there was no real contest between the two of us. He was born to come second. I had always been annoyed by his submission though, the faithful old dog's eyes he gave me. I had often tormented him just to see if he would some day return the favor.

It had been a relief for both of us when he went to study engineering in Ashborough. To have his own life separate from mine. Ichabod's teachers had considered him to be an exceedingly talented engineer, even to such an extent that they predicted him a career in one of the government's technical institutions – Or perhaps in one of the private companies that were manufacturing steam engines. Those were nowadays rising up in Knightsbridge like weed.

Ichabod had met Lisbeth on the campus. She had been one of the first female students accepted in the Technical University. Wisely he had brought Lisbeth to meet me only after their betrothal.

I do not know why I decided, despite their engagement, to seduce Lisbeth. I had been bored, I guess, having spent so many months in the countryside. Perhaps I had been irritated by my brother's happiness and Lisbeth's intellectual self-confidence, so rarely seen in a woman. I had yearned for a challenge and could not resist it when it was presented to me in such a tantalizing form.

I had wanted to break her.

It started to rain as I walked. The pressure of water forced down the industrial smoke that always cloaked the city. People turned up their collars and held handkerchiefs over their faces to protect themselves from the poisonous gasses. I opened my umbrella and walked briskly the last quarter to the apartment.

I loped up the stairs and knocked on the door. Its blue paint was faded and chipped. A graying woman opened it ajar. With cataract-clouded eyes she watched me, questioning. When she noticed I was a gentleman, she opened the door only a fragment more.

"What do you want?" she asked.

"I am looking for Mister Ichabod Thorpe", I said and settled my umbrella to better cover my back. "I was told that he rents a room here."

She stared at me. "Mister Thorpe left us three days ago."

"Do you know where he went?"

"I don't, and I don't want to either," she said and closed her mouth with a snap.

"Do you know where he might have gone? This is a matter of great importance for me. He is my brother." I pulled some money from the clip and handed it to her. She grabbed the note from my hand and folded it in the pocket of her skirt.

"I'll give you a good piece of advice for your money," she said, suddenly grabbing my sleeve. "Abandon your brother. He has sinned." The landlady's eyes were gleaming.

I pulled my arm from her rheumatic grip.

"As have we all, woman," I grumbled, annoyed.

"Your brother is worse than the rest. His moving machines... I have seen his plans. He is playing God. He will go to Hell for his deeds!"

The door closed with a slam and soon enough I heard her latch it.

I no longer wondered why Ichabod had given up his room.

For three days I tried to find my brother without any results. From the university I discovered that his diploma work was mentored by a certain distinguished scientist from Genova, and that he and my brother had been in contact only by letters. No-one knew where Ichabod's workshop was. He did not show up to any of the pubs or taverns where the students of the Technical University usually spent their time and money. I could only assume that after leaving his rental apartment my brother had moved into his workshop and was now staying there.

On the evening of the third day I found myself again in John Reston's study.

"I don't understand what he is messing about," I said, rubbing my temple. "It's like he has lost his mind. Over a woman!"

John balanced a glass of Scotland's finest on his knee. "Ichabod is not like you and me, Thaddeus," he said and sucked his lips. "He really loved Lisbeth."

I uttered a laughter. "How noble of you to consider you and me are alike in this respect, when you damn well know that I am a thousand times worse than you will ever be. I readily admit it! For me, women are tools of pleasure." Here I felt it still necessary to redeem myself a little. "But I have always been frank about it.

With them, I mean. Every lover that I have had has known my true nature right from the start."

All but one. Lisbeth had refused to understand that my relationship with her had been only a game – a pleasant way to pass time. Lisbeth, whose brown eyes had seemed so accusing. Lisbeth, who had fallen over the stone railing. Hard as I tried to erase those last tragic moments, her body on the verandah was forever seared on my mind.

"I have to find Ichabod," I said to John. "I will take him home to recover. I owe him that at least."

John sighed. "I received a word from Ichabod this afternoon. He asked for some money. He has an invoice from a clock-smith on Rochester Road and he will not get the parts he needs for his work unless he can pay for his previous purchases."

"What? Why did you not tell me this immediately?" John waved his hand. "I thought Ichabod was better off without you."

I got visibly irritated, but John continued: "You know it yourself. You have caused only sorrow and tears for Ichabod. You had an affair with your brother's fiancée, Thaddeus! God knows what happened between you two, but your brother seems to blame you for Lisbeth's... unfortunate decision." John raised his hand to silence my rebuttal. "But now I feel that Ichabod has gone too far. The total sum of the invoice is significant. I have no such money to give him."

"Did he give you the name and address of the clocksmith?"

John nodded.

"Give them to me."

The establishments of city's finest clock-smiths and jewelers were located on the south end of Rochester Road. In these shops attention was paid to the smallest of details and, when necessary, the master himself did the required work. I selected the first store in the row of many.

A bell rung over the door. Gas lamps lit the narrow space of the shop. Noises from horse carriages and people in the street died behind me as the heavy door closed with a thump. The only sound that could be heard was the even ticking from dozens of clockworks lining the shelves. Behind the counter stood an elderly man wearing an immaculate three-piece suit. In his left hand he held a tiny screwdriver. In his right hand was a clockwork-device inside a brass cover, shaped like an

eggshell. He was examining it with a loupe.

"May I be of assistance?" he asked, without lifting his eyes from the intricate machine.

"I have come to pay off a debt," I said.

The clock-smith lifted his gaze then, took the loupe and placed it on the table next to the brass machine. The device grew small legs under its belly and started to whisk itself towards the edge of the table. The clock-smith frowned, opened a drawer and guided the clockwork into it.

"The purchases were made by Mister Ichabod Thorpe" I elaborated.

The clock-smith reached out and took a large ledger book from a cabinet behind the counter. He lowered the book on the counter and ran his forefinger over several paragraphs before he found my brother's name. Clockwork machines were stubbornly ticking away.

"Ah," he said, finally, "yes. Quite. I remember him. Fascinating project. His latest order is already waiting. Will you take it with you?"

For a moment I stared at him. "Yes. Yes, I will take it."

"Do you want to inspect that the parts are as Mister Thorpe wished?"

"Certainly not. Machines that my brother builds have always been mysteries to me." I sneered. "My own interests lie... elsewhere."

"In that case, I'll tell the boy to pack them properly," the clock-smith said. "The parts are very sensitive. Give my greetings to Mister Thorpe. I would gladly see the automaton when it is finished."

"Of course", I said, not really listening. "My brother will be pleased to hear it."

The clock-smith's assistant brought me the parts Ichabod had ordered. They were wrapped in brown paper, forming a parcel hardly larger than my fist. I weighed the parcel in my hand. It was surprisingly light.

I told the clock-smith: "It might be, that I and my brother miss each other. If he comes asking for the parts, please tell him that while in town, I am staying at King's Head."

Ichabod arrived at the hotel that very evening. I was enjoying my sherry in the smoking room at the time.

"Give them to me, Thaddeus," he said and held out his hand. My brother's palm and fingertips were covered in dark stains and small cuts. Ichabod's eyes, red and deep sunk, gleamed with unnatural brightness from his agonized face.

"Dear God, Ichabod." I placed my glass on a table and settled my cigar next to it. "You look horrid!"

"Give them to me. The parts."

Several people in the smoking room leered at us with curiosity. "Ichabod, we cannot discuss the matter in public. Come to my room. Let us talk there."

Ichabod glanced around, grunted his approval and followed me to the second floor. After we got into my rooms he held out is hand again.

"Don't be ridiculous," I said and pointed at a small couch in the living room. "Do sit. Make yourself comfortable. Do you want something to drink?"

Ichabod reluctantly lowered his hand and collapsed on the couch. Dust with a sharp metallic stink puffed out of his clothes. It landed in big rusty clouds over the red plush. I put the glass in my brother's hand and watched him down its contents in one gulp. As the warmth of alcohol spread on his limbs, he seemed to relax a little.

"You have to give me the parts. I need them," he said with a raspy voice. His hands were shaking. "I am almost done."

"John Reston and the rest have been worried about you. I would have been too, had I known the state you have fallen into, since I saw you last. What on earth has happened to you, brother?" Outside it started to rain again. Big, heavy drops hit the room's window. I took a sip from my glass. "I went to see Lisbeth's grave. I heard that her final resting place is, in fact, not where it should be. Can you explain that?"

Ichabod stared at his hands. "I need the parts."

"You have already made that clear enough." I said, irritated. "Ichabod, do you want to be remembered as a lunatic? As a grave robber?"

But Ichabod only frowned and said nothing.

"There is more at stake here than you and your obsession with your late fiancée. You are in danger to ruin also my reputation and our family's good name. What do you want? Do you want me to apologize?" I spat it out. "All right: I am s —"

"Do not utter a word!" Ichabod jumped up and grabbed my shoulder. There was a fire burning in his eyes. "Don't you dare. You do not have the right to talk about her!"

"What else would we talk about, Ichabod? Lisbeth

is now between us more than she ever was when she lived!"

We stared at each other in silent rage. I forced myself to take a deep breath. Took a step back. Sighed. "Look at what that woman has done to us. Come home with me. Rest a while, think what you want from life. What do you have here to live for?"

There was a change on Ichabod's face. He gave a nervous laughter and his fingers pressed themselves anew into my shoulder. "I will show you! Tomorrow. At the workshop."

Sudden enthusiasm in Ichabod's posture scared me. I nodded, abashed by his behavior, the half-emptied glass of brandy still in my hands.

Ichabod released his grip and smiled. "Good. I shall give you the address. But you must promise: Do not come before tomorrow. Not before I am ready."

Yet again he held out his hand. I finally put the glass aside and retrieved the parcel I had got from the clock-smith on Rochester Road. Ichabod held it like a valuable treasure. He wrote the address of the workshop on a small piece of paper, straightened his back and tucked the parcel carefully in his pocket.

"We shall meet tomorrow. In the workshop. It is only right, that you will be there too."

I shook his hand and said: "Until tomorrow."

I had my breakfast on the following morning at the hotel, as usual. I read the paper and exchanged a few words about the situation in Europe with a gentleman sitting in the next table. I asked the doorman how far the address Ichabod had given me was located. After hearing the answer I asked him to order for a rental carriage. The porter, who knew my preferences regarding means of transport, regretted: "I am sorry to say, Mr Thorpe, but only the beetles go that far into the industrial area. The drivers of carriages complain that the horses won't go there. Because of the noise, sir."

I sighed. "All right, a beetle then."

Ten minutes later I had fetched my coat and umbrella from my room. I had also written a message to John Reston. In it I had told him that I had found Ichabod and would return home the very same day, with or without my brother. I will try to persuade him to come home with me, I wrote on the hotel's thick and gilded paper, but in case he still carries his grudge for me over Lisbeth, I would be grateful, if You would visit him, at

least once in a while, and see that he does not do anything stupid. I wrote the address of Ichabod's workshop at the end of the note. After releasing the note to a runner I entered the beetle waiting for me.

Half an hour later I exited the mechanical beast in the middle of the Knightsbridge industrial area, already in a sour mood and reeking of bitter smoke. The area had been developed vigorously over the past fifteen years. There were almost fifty separate factories standing and several more to be built. Even now a thumping noise from machines was heard from most of them. Yellowish smoke puffing from the high chimneys colored the sky dirty, spotty green, at places covering it altogether with its odious mass. Next to the larger factories there were also a few smaller rental warehouses, red-tiled buildings each marked with a roman number over the door. According to Ichabod's directions his workshop was located in the warehouse number XVII.

I pulled twice on the bell rope hanging next to the door.

Ichabod opened the door almost immediately. "You came," he said.

"This place stinks, brother."

Ichabod frowned. "Come inside."

I stepped in over the slightly elevated threshold and followed him deeper into the building. After a small entryway the workshop opened up into a large open space, dominated by a bulky iron chamber on its opposite end. The chamber's shape reminded me of the Egyptian sarcophagi I had seen on my visit to London. It was much larger than those I had seen though. On its front was placed a heavy door with a small round window on eye level.

Coming closer I saw a glimpse of a warm coppercolored doll's face.

"Playing with dolls, are you now?" I muttered under my breath.

Lisbeth's shrill laughter under the shadow of the large oak in our garden. The memory struck me. I remembered it so well. Our first encounter. The buzzing of insects. Lisbeth's warm flesh in the cup of my hand. And later, the inevitable tears. Disappointment. Sadness, anger. I wiped them from my mind like a stain from a sleeve, annoyed at their sudden existence.

"Your diploma work?" I asked out loud, to be polite,

as I pointed towards the round window.

Ichabod was bent over the control panel on the left side of the chamber. The surface of the table was covered with all kinds of meters and levers. Electric wires coming from under the table had been tied to bundles as big as my wrist. Their snakelike form disappeared somewhere back of the chamber. A buzzing electric charge raised the hairs on my arms. Ichabod watched the dials intently and only briefly glimpsed at me.

"You'll see," he said, rubbing his forehead with his fingers. "Soon enough. Perhaps only five, ten minutes more. Then we can start the revival stage."

Absconding myself from the heinous technical gibberish I sensed coming I decided to use that moment to have a look around the workshop, but thankfully my brother seemed completely absorbed by his work. He bothered me no further with his science.

Right at the back of the workshop I saw a small cooking corner and a bed. I noticed the remains of Ichabod's breakfast spread on the coffee table next to the bed. A pot of tea, a dirty cup and a half-eaten sandwich. On my right side there stood a large oaken table. Its surface was darkened and sticky, dirty tools were spread out on the floor around it. I frowned. Ichabod had always handled his tools with care. I took a pair of pliers and scraped them absent-mindedly with my thumbnail. Sticky, grainy substance stuck to my fingers.

Ichabod clapped his hands, turned to face me and smiled a twitching, unnerving smile. "Aren't you going to ask me what I am up to?"

I wiped my fingers with a filthy cloth lying on the table. "You know very well that I am not interested in mechanics. I came to take you home, Ichabod."

"No," Ichabod said. "You don't understand. I am almost ready. She is coming back."

"Who is coming back?" I asked stupidly.

"Lisbeth. She is coming back." Ichabod smiled widely, showing his teeth, but his hands were trembling.

"Lisbeth is dead, Ichabod. She has been dead for over a month." I said, but Ichabod only waved his hand, impatient.

"Of course she is dead. I know it better than anyone. I have worked her body all these weeks. I have

seen her corruption."

"Ichabod," I said. "What insanities are you speaking?"

"There, on that table," Ichabod said, his expression portraying both tenderness and horror. "I gathered all the parts I could still use. Vital organs, brains, heart and lungs I preserved in an ointment I had especially made for the purpose. I transformed them to better endure the ravages of time." Ichabod rubbed his forehead with a sweaty hand. "Yet, so much was broken," he mumbled, "ruined."

Only then I recognized the heavy smell of old blood that emanated from the dark table. My eyes turned to the stained tools, my fingers, the ragged piece of fabric in my hands. To the zinc buckets under the table, whose unspeakable contents were now covered with heavy linen cloth. I was repelled. Horrified.

"I did not want to," Ichabod whispered, his voice tight with emotion, "that she would feel such things ever again. I made her a body that would never be destroyed. A body made of iron and brass."

Ichabod yanked several levers. I heard the sizzle of electricity as power levels rose in the machine. Air was hissing in its valves.

"I was lucky," Ichabod raised his voice, "that I had already studied the possibilities to lengthen human life with mechanics. I had even made a few experiments with animals. When Lisbeth perished, I only needed to take my research to its logical conclusion!"

At last I understood that which had been in front of me this whole time. That which I should have understood a long time ago. In the chamber stood a woman made of metal, supported upright by sturdy leather straps. Her body was covered with tiny, coppercolored scales, as if heavily armored. Her face was a polished mask made of brass. On it Ichabod had immortalized Lisbeth's features; her self-conscious smile, high cheekbones, even the nose, a little too short to make her a true beauty, had been faithfully molded into metal. The love-seeking, desperate look so familiar in her capricorn eyes had been glassed with white and greenish brown enamel. The arms, bound crossed over her chest, were delicate and jointed. The engagement ring I had last seen on Lisbeth's finger was soldered on her left hand.

"You have truly gone insane."

Ichabod's jaws tightened, but he continued his work. The buzzing from the machines grew higher.

"Ichabod!" I bellowed over the noise. "It is not too late! We can take the body back to its grave. No-one would know."

Ichabod rested his hand on a large lever. When he yanked it something inside the chamber started to crackle and hiss. The floor of the workshop vibrated. I took a staggering step to get farther away from the vibrations, but the sensation alone almost made me fall over. Grabbing one of the rugged pillars supporting the workroom's roof I stood erect once more, gasping for breath.

Ichabod turned. I saw tears in his eyes. "I loved her! I did! Not you. You only wanted to stain her," Ichabod shouted through the blue sparkles of crackling electricity flying all around us. "Now..."

The buzz from the chamber grew so loud that I clamped my hands over my ears. The electrical charge banged and crackled. Hot steam erupted with exploding force from the chamber's valves. I heard my brother shout, by now more to himself than to me.

"She will be alive... mine... and you cannot..."

"Ichabod!" I screamed, covering still my ears with my hands. I heard my own voice muffled and weak. "I beg you! Stop this madness!"

"...separate us..." Ichabod kept turning dials and pulling levers. He ran to the chamber and then back to the control panel. Sweat was glistening on his temples.

The air inside the chamber turned thick and vaporized. A sudden noise penetrated my consciousness. High, whining noise, that seemed to continue for ages.

Hot air burned my mouth and nose. The plaster dust raining from the ceiling made me cough rough, unrelenting barks.

The whining got unbearable, it filled my head and pushed me to the very limits of my sanity. I fell down on the floor planks and could not move again.

My brother pulled the last lever and finally, exhausted, dropped to his knees in front of the chamber. The electrical crackle ended. My breath was rasping.

The workshop had grown dark. Only a cold column of daylight shone from the crusted windows near the ceiling. Heavy, brown dust was floating through the air, so thick that it made the light splitting the darkness seem solid. I saw Ichabod, collapsed next to the control

panel.

The door of the chamber thumped.

Ichabod groaned. He grabbed the worktable's corner with his hand and, with great effort, pushed himself up. His shoulders were slumped like an old man's. Ichabod scuffled towards the metal chamber and stayed there leaning on its wall.

The moments before Lisbeth's death pushed their way from the darkest corners of my mind. The fight we had had, the nasty words, gestures, shouting.

Something moved inside the chamber.

Mindless, icy terror rushed through me. I knew now that I would do anything in my power to keep that chamber door closed forever. I tried to raise myself, but my limbs were weak and my head was bursting. The exertion only lead to another tearing fit of coughs.

"Ichabod, don't do it! I have to tell you..." I pleaded. "Lisbeth's death... It wasn't a suicide. She did not kill herself."

Ichabod turned towards me. The movement made him wince. "What did you say?"

I pushed myself on my other elbow and fought the burning sensation in my lungs. "We were together when it happened. Lisbeth wanted to leave you, for me."

"You are lying," Ichabod said. His hands formed fists.

"I declined her. I said I would not do it. We stood in the balcony. She got furious and charged at me." I heard the cruel words come from my mouth in a stream, "She reeled and... and fell. It was an accident! I swear it, Ichabod."

Ichabod stood swaying and looked at his own fist. "Could even you be that low? All this time you have let me think... You have let us all believe that Lisbeth took her own life? So you wouldn't be blamed? And you have the impudence to say that I have shamed her memory?"

"I did not want to hurt you any more than I already had." I swallowed, pitifully. "Ichabod...
Believe me, when I say: She did not love you. She was not faithful. Please, put an end to it. Do not open that door."

Ichabod shook his head. "It doesn't matter," he said and staggered towards the chamber door. "Nothing

that happened in June, matters anymore. She is ready. She is alive. And now she is mine."

Ichabod cranked the lock.

The chamber door banged open, its hinges creaked. Hot, stale air smelling like rotten meat floated into the room from the chamber. Ichabod swayed. Small trickle of blood oozed from his left ear. A brass woman stepped out from the chamber.

It placed its hands on both sides of Ichabod's neck. "Lisbeth..." Ichabod breathed.

Narrow fingers pressed into the skin of his throat. They tightened their grip to the point where Ichabod's knees buckled under him. As Ichabod was trying in vain to draw breath, I once more heard the whining noise and understood, that it came from the creature standing beside my brother. My own horrified wail mixed into the squealing.

"Ichabod! No!"

The shrill scream penetrated me. It ached and cut me. I was in pain, dying. I pressed my face on the coolness of the floor and stayed there until the noise ceased. I heard a thump as Ichabod's lifeless body sagged to the floor.

Light metallic feet stepped over the body.

The creature advanced. I heard the silent hissing and ticking of cogwheels as it moved through the shadows. The scales of its man-made body glided softly amidst, under and over each other. Shiny, curving legs, fingers, neck. I stared in horror. It moved like a ballerina. The delicate doll face came ever closer, its brass surface reflecting the light of the workshop in warm wavy lines. Lisbeth crouched. There she watched me, head slightly tilted, with expressionless enamel-covered eyes.

I heard her bright, tinkling voice which reminded me of a musical box. "You lied, Th addeus," she said.

"My death was no accident."

Jointed fingers lowered on both sides of my face. They pressed. The world turned black.

icadas were singing, and Lisbeth's brown eyes had glistened with tears.

"Thaddeus, no," she had bleeted. "I love you."

"I don't love you, Lisbeth. I don't even care for you much anymore. You have become a nuisance."

"I... I will tell Ichabod!" she had sobbed. "I will tell him all the things you did to me. I will tell him how you courted me. How we made love in the garden." Desperate hatred had turned Lisbeth's face ugly. I could not understand what I had ever seen in her.

"I will tell the whole world if I have to!" she had shouted.

"I can't let you do that," I had said. I had raised my hand on her chest and pushed her towards the railing. "I will not let you cause a scandal."

When Lisbeth's rage had turned into comprehension and terror, her nails had sunk into my arms as she had tried to grab fabric and skin. My hands had pushed her smaller, weaker hands easily off of me. The gas lamp's light from the room behind us had given a curious shade of bronze to her freckled skin.

"You should have settled for Ichabod."

Lisbeth's mouth had opened to scream, but too late. It had taken only one violent push and then... it was over. Lisbeth's twisted body spread on the stones of the verandah. Me, running to my room, washing my face, changing my shirt and waiting for somebody else to find the body.

It had been oh so easy.

woke up in my own bed. My head was aching. Heavy, musty taste of smoke covered my mouth like sackcloth. The clothes on my bedside stank of workshop and brass. I took a sip of water. I took a bath. I changed my clothes to clean ones. I ate. The following days I spent in a dreamlike state.

John Reston wrote me a letter.

Dear Thaddeus,

to my sorrow I have to inform You that from the wreckage of the workshop we have found the remains of a man. The body had burned as badly as the rest of the workshop, but it is probably wisest to assume that the man was Ichabod. I am sorry.

We may never find out what Ichabod was building in his workshop, for the fire was so fierce that it destroyed every trace of his plans. We may only hope that his work gave him comfort in his last days of existence.

Please allow me to express my deepest condolences for Your loss,

John R.

"What does John want?" Lisbeth's voice tinkles with metal tongues as she peers over my shoulder. She takes a peek at the letter resting on my desk.

"They have found Ichabod's body," I answer. I squeeze my fingers into a fist so hard that my knuckles turn bone-white. Lisbeth lowers her cold, jointed fingers on my hand, takes the pen from me and places it gently on the edge of the desk. Her enamel eyes watch me, beautiful and expressionless.

My heart is strangled by fury and sorrow. I have to ask.

"Why did you kill him?"

Lisbeth does not answer.

"Ichabod saved your life. He gave up everything for you. He created you!" I feel another fit coming. My hands are shaking. I am shaking. I need my injection. That, at least, she is willing to grant me.

Lisbeth brushes my temple with her fingers. She presses her unyielding brass mouth on my lips and the voice inside her tinkles: "It is you who I wanted. Right from the moment I first saw your lovely face." She lowers her hand on my thigh and squeezes it – possessively, only just so that it hurts.

"Now that Ichabod is gone, we can finally be together."

Lisbeth will never leave me. She does not sleep. She will not grow old. She does not forget. Lisbeth loves me more than any woman could ever love a man.

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Magdalena Hai (Born 1978 in Jyväskylä)

Magdalena Hai is a versatile author of YA, Science Fiction and Fantasy. In recent years she has published a children's book, a trilogy of steampunk novels (Gigi & Henry Series), as well as several short stories. Her novels and short stories have been nominated for several Finnish literary awards, including the annual Atorox Award for the best Finnish SF/F short story and the LukuVarkaus Award for the best novel for younger readers. Her novel Kerjäläisprinsessa (The Beggar Princess) won the Kirjava Kettu Award in 2014.

The Brass Bride ("Vaskimorsian") was written as a tribute to the old masters of sci-fi and horror: Mary Shelley, Jules Verne and H. G. Wells, and it was first published in 2012 in the first Finnish anthology of steampunk short stories, Steampunk! - Koneita ja korsetteja (Steampunk! – Machines and Corsets). The story is situated in the same alternate universe as the author's Gigi & Henry Series.

Magdalena Hai is a lover of history and all things vintage, funny, pretty and strange. Her favorite monsters are old-timey werewolves.



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he pain is gone, the cruel knife cuts no more. Only the music is left. Wind blows from the sea and the seafoam gathers in the footprints on the beach.

So many times I have heard how extravagant a life we led, how selfish and peculiar we were. We were gods, you and I. The audience is hungry and worships and haunts us until we die.

And as you taught me, gods can never die.

That first night I swam to the surface. I was lost and afraid and looked for a sheltered cove to rest. An outboard engine had cut a wound on my side. Darkness protected me as I swam to the shore. But there was no shelter, only a wide sandy beach.

I heard music from the shore. Bass was thundering on the ground and the sound carried under the waves. Amusement park's lights shone bright in the dark. Ferris wheel turned and turned: red, blue and yellow light bulbs glistened in the night in the shape of a star. Slot machines roared in the arcade, the scent of melted butter and sugar floating through the air. People rode the horses in the merry-go-round that played a cheery tune. In my memories they are even more beautiful than they actually were in 1978, on Venice Beach. More fragile and glamorous, less tanned legs or pearly white smiles.

I saw all of this from my hiding place. Then I saw you.

You stood there, alone on the beach. So tiny, like a doll. Your waist was small and your legs were so long and thin. Your skin was black as ebony in the moonlight, curly hair like a soft cloud around your head. Noises of the amusement park faded in the background. You walked on the beach, singing. The music felt like the rain that sweeps across the sand when the sea goes still in the autumn. The words were incomprehensible to me, but I heard the meaning behind them. I heard the beating of your heart, the smell of your perfume through seaweed and salt, almost tasted the sweat on your neck.

The moon hid behind a cloud and it became dark once more. You turned to leave as I started to sing. The long, melancholy wail of a sea creature, sound covering everything like a mist: the music, the hum of the amusement park. You walked onto the edge of the water. You looked around, searching for the singer. I pushed myself above the waves and looked directly into

you. You saw me and walked towards me.

The night was merciful, it did not reveal all my ugliness at once. You saw my tail, my fat body and small eyes, but did not shun away. You walked into the water, looked me in the eyes and held my blunt head in your hands. I quivered at your touch, drowned into your eyes. At that moment I knew I would follow you wherever you'd go. You rubbed ointment into my wounds, doused my back with water so that my skin wouldn't dry.

You took me with you. I left the home where I had lived my whole life without a moment's hesitation. I left the ocean. I did not look back.

(Later some people criticised you from taking the advantage. You should have left it where it belonged, they said. They accused you of ever being the little princess, greedy and seeking attention. You did not care. You were ambitious. You presented me as your prize and I didn't mind. When you looked at me, I felt I was good.)

Beauty comes from within, you said, and I was dying to believe you.

Those days there were fewer cars on the beach. Houses were smaller with whitewashed walls and palm trees in the yards. Beach bars closed at sunset, waiters took down the shades and carried the chairs indoors. There were small boulevard theaters that featured everything from drag shows to singing dogs. Lights of the amusement park are the only thing left, now; same as they were, reflecting from the dark water at night; the sounds and the music drifting far into the open sea.

You dragged me there, into the amusement park and onto the stage with you. They thrusted me a small guitar, a ukulele, that I could somewhat strum with my flippers. I shook my tail when they told me to and felt so ashamed.

You were showered with questions. Where did you find it? Is it a male or a female? You told me not to mind them. Start singing, you said.

I sang the same song that I had sung that first night. Audience fell silent. Drummer ceased playing, the night club owner froze holding the glass in his hand midway. Women listened with their mouths open, men sat silent in their own thoughts, as if they had suddenly remembered something, a dream, perhaps. You stood off-stage, hidden from the audience.

When the song was over you were the first one to clap. Your eyes were shining like stars. You walked on stage in your high heels and we took a bow hand in hand. Backstage you kissed me. We belong to them now, you whispered.

We started performing together. From the beach boulevard stages to nightclubs and discos, three performances a night. You danced around me, on and off the stage. You introduced me to all the right people, shook their hands and smiled tirelessly. You did it all for my 'career' as you called it. I did whatever you told me to do. I loved the music, music that was ours. You supported me when I had a stage fright, stood behind me and gave me a gentle push when it was time to step into the limelight. You wiped sweat from my whiskers and held my head between your hands, always looking directly into my eyes.

You said my voice made the air drizzle with electric. It got women excited and filled men with energy. Hearing my voice made everyone in the audience want to dance. People longed for something exciting and new. You watched my every step. When with other people, you would lean yourself towards me or stand very close, so that everyone would know who I belonged to. I knew what was going on, so did everybody else. Usually people were discreet and only spoke behind our backs.

Only their dogs could not stand me. They barked and yapped at me wherever I went and you had to chase them off.

We recorded our first duets in a cramped booth of a stuffy studio. There were cigarette burns in a dirty carpet and the sound engineer had a raspy, whisky voice. My skin was dry and itching, so you ran water from the tap into a plastic cup and poured that on me. I held on. Our music became alive on the record. Sometimes it was as bright as the starry night over the ocean, other times hot and humid as those August nights, the divine funk. Despite the heat and discomfort, I loved it all.

You flirted with me onstage because the audience wanted that. You stroked my head and the chest of the shirt you had given to me. You did other things, too. After the show you would take me into your arms and drag me into your bed that sagged under my weight. You taught me how to touch you and I was your

willing pupil. We embraced as you encouraged me, your body so warm, and I lost myself in your scent.

Afterwards you always had regrets. You said that I was vulnerable and you should not have. Yet, you continued. I wanted to believe you meant it, when you said that you loved me.

When I got tired of the endless shows, you took me to the beach for a while. I would cool my tail in the water and look at the waves. We sat by the waterline and let the sun warm our aching limbs. You smoked a cigarette. You drew shapes absentmindedly in the sand with your toe. I snuggled at your side, drew myself as close as I dared. I did not have to say anything. You noticed, drew to and fro, our endless little dance. I looked at your eyes, just looked. You stroke my cheek and bought me a red balloon from the stall.

How could I have known that you would tire of me so quickly? In the movie premiere you held my hand and kissed me in front of the photographers. I was your mascot and your pet. I squirmed on the red carpet as I followed you with great difficulty. My eyes would dry and ache under the bright lights.

You told me I was unique. You never told me "yes", yet you never told me properly "no." You were eating me alive.

s I lay here I hear rumble from the ground. Fireworks colour the sky blue and green, the colours glisten in the black water. Rats flee to their holes. People drink and dance. The sand is dotted white with hamburger wrappers, empty cans and cartons. Seagulls fight over them, they are not scared of the banging fireworks. Sweet wine flows down peoples' throats, sangria, your favorite. I never did learn how to drink wine.

I saw myself on the television screen and felt ashamed. They wrote about us in the papers, more of it invented than true. An odd couple, Beauty and the Beast. Surely she's not sleeping with that thing, that's disgusting.

You told me not to care. You told me it was not my fault. I did not listen. If anywhere, it was in that world where I realised happiness did not come for free. For you, maybe, for you were perfect the way you were. But

the rest of us had to work for it. There were improved people all around us, surgeons had narrowed people's meager fat layers even more, added padding to women's lips and breasts.

I went to see them, the witch doctors of the beach. They promised me a new, more beautiful life. I gave them permission to cut me, allowed the cold blade penetrate my flesh. What price would I not pay? The paper sheets felt rough as the cold, plastic mask was pulled over my face. The blade neared my skin. They said I had nothing to worry about. They cut my tail in half and gave me two poles for legs. After a while I took my first trembling steps. You were horrified of the change, yet said nothing.

(Later, in a national broadcast, you said that you would have loved me no matter what I looked like. You did not explain further, why did you not do so.)

I got on my two feet and danced. Even though every step felt like knives slashing the bottoms of my feet, I kept on dancing. I loved my new skill, the thrill of the dance overcame everything else. There were more people around me now and I no longer listened to you only. You congratulated me when my first solo album sold better than any of our joint records, said that you had always known this would happen. You smiled and patted my cheek, but there was a new tone in your voice and a thin line in the side your mouth. Still, you danced with me and I lifted you up in the air. You smiled radiantly at the audience, but avoided my gaze. I did not know you had already made your decision.

Offstage you would no longer touch me.

Then came the day that you left me. The memory is almost too clear, as if the bright sunlight of that morning has burned it my brain.

That morning I woke up to the sound of church bells. They were ringing on the hills as the morning crept between the shutters and into the room. It was Sunday. A servant opened the door and congratulated me while bringing me breakfast.

What was going on?

I was too impatient to get dressed and run down the stairs wrapped in a towel, looking for you. You stood in the hotel lobby, all made-up and smiling radiantly. Your hair was different, it was tied up in a knot and covered with a scarf. A small smile and sweetly down-cast eyes. A handsome blond-haired shipowner bloke was standing next to you. The wedding boat was anchored

in the harbor and would leave that very night.

That evening I walked to the pier. I sat on the wooden stairs to cool my burning feet in the sea, but even though the knives still cut my feet on each step, my heart was now aching even more. The sea opened up before me, but it would not offer me an escape anymore. I listened to the sound of the waves until there was nothing more, nothing but the pain. I sat there until nightfall, out of sight. I don't know if you had tried to find me to explain, or if you had forgotten about me entirely. I watched as the lights of the ship disappeared into the horizon. I imagined you surrender to that broad-jawed man, your head thrown back and your back arching in his embrace.

I walked under the sun with my two feet, but the light did not look the same anymore. I made a new album, then another one, remodelled and improved myself. Again and again I lay on the surgeon's table, and when the bandages were removed and I looked in the mirror, I was beautiful again. My previously dark and gray skin had turned marble-white.

I saw people poking at my picture on the pages of the magazines, pointing their fingers and shaking their heads. They called me grotesque. The interviewers cornered me. Who are you? Are you an animal or a man? I could not answer, so they made up their own truth. An expert testified on a television show how a siren animal can never coexist with humans. I was a threat to the people, a freak: a water sprite that pursues their children and steals them away into the depths. I did not argue. I did nothing.

Your big house on the beach was now empty. I bought it and built high walls around it. Despite the knife I grew uglier every day. I made a film, went on a tour. I only opened my mouth to sing and even that I did less frequently than before. I surrounded myself with security guards. I turned the mirrors to face the wall, drew curtains to cover the windows.

I drew a line with my stub of a foot, drew until I had almost worn myself down. The knives never stopped cutting, the pain never ended.

t's new moon. On the beach I gather pieces of branches, seaweed, a shoe somebody has left behind. I fashion our children from the scrapes. I place seashells as the eyes, mother-of-pearl and coral for

the tiny mouths. I stay up with them and play, sing many lullabies. I remember your curls and how you used to push your fingers through your hair. It starts to rain and for many days nobody comes. The foam leaves a deep trail onto the wet sand. The children break apart, disappear into the folds of the water.

I knew that you were in town. You hadn't sent me a word. In the picture of a boulevard magazine you laughed, the people around you were young and beautiful and I did not know them. From the letters printed with smudged ink I read that you had divorced once more. In my dark bedroom I sat holding the magazine for a long time. My voice was rusty and my limbs had grown stiff. I moved slowly and painfully. Yet I got up and called my manager that I would perform again.

As I climbed onto the stage and the lights went up, I felt alive again. The backup singers, players, dancers all applauded. Smoke machines, fans and flames roared, the guitar sang. There were new, young people around me. They had ideas. They had surpassed me in skill, but it didn't matter, we worked together now. The pain got worse every day, but I did not care. I endured, trained my voice to be clear once again. Finally I could not help but to call you.

You had never hired anybody to answer your phone for you, such a modest, down-to-earth woman you always were. The phone rang many times. The line opened and I heard your greeting at the other end. Your voice sounded the same as it did years ago and it brought tears to my eyes. When you heard who it was on the other end of the line you were silent for a long time. I could hear you breathing against the receiver. I, too, breathed, nearly the same air, on the same beach. So close.

You hung up without saying a word.

I put down the receiver and went out on the street without my bodyguards, in my costume. I started walking, not knowing where. If people recognised me, they did not say anything. I walked for hours until the city and its suburbs were behind me. I did not feel tired or thirsty. When the pale stars came out in the sky, I climbed a high cliff above the sea. I saw the windows of our house from there, or so I imagined, not sure from such a distance and in such darkness.

I started to sing. The wind rose, storm clouds

gathered over the city and put out the stars. I saw the silhouettes of the city's skyscrapers, the lights of the ships out in the open sea. People in the hills hid in their castles, the black cars were driven to safety. The amusement park's ferris wheel stopped. Lightning flashed in the hills and I could feel the thunder on the top of the cliff. The city was covered by rain. I added power to my voice and felt an electric current flow through my body.

In my heyday I had been as quick as a lightning. I never missed a beat, I could follow the most difficult rhythms. I called out for the thunder. When the lightning finally struck, it nearly split me in two. It took my breath away and lifted me up in the air. For a moment everything was blue, clear. All my senses had disappeared. I fell from the cliff, into darkness.

I lay in the bottom. A muddy, green light swayed around me. The silence of the sea surrounded me once again. I was home.

After the storm people drifted to the beach. They cried and laid down flowers into the water. There were many of them, hundreds. More people came than to my last shows when I was still alive. They put up a stone in the sand. It has the name they gave to me written on it, for they never found my body even as they tried.

They still come, they are many. I see them from the other side of the water. For a moment the water is clear as glass, the longing mutual.

Slowly my mangled face and burnt scalp started to fall apart. Slimy water plants skimmed my fingers and broken nails. Krill and crayfish gnawed the flesh from my limbs. Siren animals have no immortal soul to rise up to the heaven on a moon beam, it floats on the waves as seafoam. The waves rocked me, lulled me as in an embrace that I could no longer reach.

At night the beach is closed. A fox runs along the shore, sniffs the stone and scurries away. Someone's coming.

I see you above me. You stand close to the water, still, just like that first night. You look taller, higher, your legs go all the way up to your neck. You still have the smooth complexion of a young woman, but now your skin is taut at the forehead and cheeks, like a thin foil stretched over your face. Your eyes look sunken with worries. Yet you are still the most beautiful woman I have ever seen.

You picked me up and fashioned me from the seafoam. Now I am foam again, and I froth at your feet, circle your toes and ankles. You look out to the sea, let the foam caress you. I wash over your legs and climb higher. The salt on your skin mixes with sea water, you step deeper into the water and the hem of your skirt gets wet. It spreads out around you like a fan. I flow underneath it. Then I see the scars.

They are white now, but ever the deeper. I see the streaks in your back and your legs, the small white paths of stitches. For the first time I see a stark hairline where the wig begins, the tattoos on your brows and lips. I see your eyes and now I know: you do not cry,

because a sea creature cannot.

I would do anything to make up for all the worry and trouble I have caused you. I have you to thank for everything, the music I loved so much. Your most humble servant, now and forever. I cling onto you and you let it happen, you lean your head back and I wash over your face and kiss you. The waves crash over us and we spin, we roll back and forth, until a cool current takes us and the beach is empty once more.

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Saara Henriksson is a writer living in Tampere, Finland. She has published two novels, *Moby Doll* in 2011 and *Linnunpaino* (*Weight of the Bird*) in 2012, and a non-Fiction book about ecological housecleaning with **Aino-Maija Leinonen** in 2014. She has co-edited a short story collection *Huomenna tuulet voimistuvat*, Finnish ecological science fiction with **Erkka Leppänen** in 2013, and a Finnish writers' guide to science fiction and fantasy *Kummallisen kirjoittajat* with **Anne Leinonen** and **Irma Hirsjärvi** in 2014.

She is currently working on her third novel, *September Gods*.



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I had barely made it through the front door to the lobby when Kristian hurled himself at me from behind the statue of Mercury and complained that the printer was malfunctioning.

- It just prints out gibberish, Kristian exclaimed.
- The weekly meeting's at ten o'clock and I should check the latest predictions before it starts. How am I supposed to do that if I can't print off anything?
 - Can't you just check the predictions directly on

your screen? I asked wearily.

- I always check the predictions manually, Kristian clamored.
 I get a better general view when I spread the papers out on my desk. Besides, the bi– annual prediction does not even fit on my screen. You know, with the Pluto thing and all now, you must be extra careful with the predictions.
 - All right, I'll check it out. There's probably

something wrong with the printer daemon.

Kristian dashed back towards his room with his tie flapping about. Damn economists! I took the elevator to the second floor and dragged myself sleepily to the print room where the printer spat out sheets of paper one after another. I picked up one sheet and studied it for a while. The only things on it were various cryptic symbols. There was definitely something wrong with the printer daemon.

The flashing light on the printer put me in a bad mood. I opened the lid and looked inside. The printer daemon sat in the corner giggling and mumbling deliriously. Its printing hand worked fast but the results made no sense. The mercury container on the daemon's collar looked empty. When I picked the daemon up, it tried to bite me but it did not succeed in doing so. I filled the container and the daemon calmed down. I placed it back in the printer but it just stood there with a confused look on its face. I took a silver memory stick and poked the pentagram on the daemon's forehead. The daemon started and returned to its normal state. The printer started pushing out printouts.

I closed the printer lid angrily. Everyone must have seen the 'Mercury Level Low' light but no one had bothered to fill the container because IT support was supposed to take care of everything. I decided to get a cup of coffee so I would wake up properly and headed to the coffee room. Much to my annoyance the coffee machine was being worked on. The front panel was open and a man in overalls was working on it.

- Is this going to take long? I asked the man.
- It should be ready soon, the man replied. There're only some minor problems with the vetehinen in the water filter.
 - There're problems with the what?
- The vetehinen. It's the water sprite that filters the water. See, the water around here is not that good.

The man saw the disbelief on my face and gestured towards the water tank. The top was off and I peeked inside. The vetehinen stared at me from inside the tank with its big, scared eyes. It sat halfway in the water with its arms wrapped around its legs. Its long hair reached down to the water and there was a half moon symbol on its forehead. The vetehinen had a copper collar on and it looked like a little blue girl who had gotten separated from her mother.

- I didn't know they use magicology in water filters these days, I said. - I thought it was only used in computers.
- It's much cheaper and better than the old devices, the man said. - There's magicology everywhere these days. You should see the molok they have in waste management. It eats all the garbage it's given.

The man took a copper memory stick and poked the vetehinen's forehead.

- You have a copper memory stick, I said.
- Silver and mercury for daemons, copper for the water folk, the man replied.

The man put the cover back on and closed the front panel.

- Now it should work better, the man said. - Give it a try.

I took some coffee but hesitated. I sniffed the drink suspiciously. The coffee did not taste strange but it was burning hot. I took my cup and continued towards the elevator. When the elevator doors opened, Emilia stepped out.

- Going down to the Olm Cave? she asked smilingly.

I grumbled something in return as I pushed the basement floor button. There are no olms in the basement and my office is not in a cave, but for some reason the Olm Cave seemed to be an amusing name for the place.



I stepped out of the elevator. Some of the letters on the IT support office door were faded or scratched out. Instead of the original 'Automagical Data Management' it said 'magical damage' with odd spacing between the letters.

Kalevi was already there. I had never seen Kalevi leave his desk or arrive at it for that matter, so apparently he lived at the office. Kalevi was thin and had pale skin, thinning blond hair and glasses that made his eyes look unnaturally big, so I had to admit that the idea of olms was not too far-fetched. I looked at his unibrow, hairy hands and reddish eyes and thought that he must have no life outside work. The final touch was his bad breath.

I wondered where the smell came from. I had never seen Kalevi eat any garlic or such. In fact, I had never seen Kalevi eat anything.

- Has anything special happened? I asked.
- There are some problems with one of the IBM servers, Kalevi told me. It seems to be losing data. I haven't yet had time to check it out.
- I can fix it. I'll let my coffee cool down a while.
 It's too hot to drink anyway.

I put the coffee cup on my desk, picked up the toolbox and headed towards the server room.

The smooth hum of the fans filled the room. It was easy to locate the faulty server based on the strange sound emanating from it. The front panel had a red Interdimensional Baal Machines company logo. I removed the panel and the red eyes of the server daemon glared at me from the shadows of the server. I sprinkled some saltpeter on the daemon to set it to hibernate. After some troubleshooting, I realized that the daemon's collar was too tight. I loosened it, checked the wiring on the daemon's head and rebooted it with my memory stick. The daemon slowly woke up and returned to its normal state. I closed the server's front panel and returned to the office.

- Do you think they feel pain? I asked as I sat down at my desk.
 - Who?
- The daemons. It looked like the server daemon was suffering because its collar was too tight.

Kalevi shrugged.

- I have no idea, he said. After all, they're just manifestations of multidimensional creatures in our three-dimensional world. Nobody really knows what's going on in their heads. I guess it doesn't matter either as long as they do what they are told to do.
- They wear a collar and they are treated worse than slaves.
- Daemons do not need rest or nourishment,
 Kalevi said. They only need electricity or some other kind of energy.
- Did you know that there's a vetehinen in the coffee machine?
- I've heard that the new machines are equipped with them. They clean the water efficiently but they don't last as long as the daemons. There aren't enough nutrients in the tap water for them so you need to

change them every two months.

I did not feel like working before the weekly meeting so I sipped my coffee and skimmed through my e-mails. After a while I decided to get a second cup of coffee. There wasn't anyone else in the coffee room but to my surprise I heard someone singing quietly. I noticed that the singing came from the coffee machine. The vetehinen must be singing to itself. I did not understand the words but the tone was melancholic and made me sad for some reason. The sad song followed me all the way to the elevator. The coffee tasted slightly salty and I wondered if vetehinens were able to weep like people do.



We gathered in the biggest meeting room for the weekly meeting. All of management was there, which meant it was no regular meeting. The CEO sat silently wearing a winged hat, holding the caduceus in his hand. The company's buck was dedicated to Mercury. It lay in a corner and yawned. The smell of it made me sick but I was smart enough to keep my mouth shut. I didn't want to be fired. Our logistics manager Samuli sat down next to me, reeking of sweat. I didn't know whether or not it was a good thing that Samuli's stench covered the smell of the buck. Kalevi was not there because he did not want to leave our office without an absolutely compelling reason.

Kristian turned on the light– bringer daemon and attached his laptop to it. The daemon's eyes lit up and soon reflected the first slide of Kristian's presentation on the screen. The slide had only our company logo, the date and Kristian's name on it. Kristian welcomed all of us to the meeting and started his presentation. The screen showed a picture of the star chart.

– As you know, there've been some major changes to the star map, Kristian began. – Ever since Pluto was dropped from the list of planets, our economy has been in a state of turmoil. The old ways of creating economical predictions are now outdated and the scientists have not yet reached a consensus on how to react to the obsolescence of Pluto.

The next picture showed the new dwarf planet.

 The International Astrology Union IAU has finally come up with a recommendation on using dwarf planets in the predictions and our financial department has now used them for the first time. The predictions do not favor the current operational mode.

The picture of the dwarf planet changed into a steeply descending curve. The CEO inhaled sharply.

If we continue in the current mode, according to the stars our turnover will decrease severely in the beginning of next year, Kristian said.
 We have to consider some radical changes.

The CEO leaned forward.

- Do we have to sacrifice a bull?
- Unfortunately that's not enough, Kristian replied.
- Mercury is in retrograde, so appeasing him isn't enough.
 - What do you suggest?

Kristian punched the space bar on his laptop and the screen showed a bird—headed man wearing a loincloth.

 When I said that we have to consider radical changes, I meant really radical changes. We have to abandon Mercury and start following Thoth.

Samuli snorted. The CEO's eyes narrowed.

- Well, who's Thoth? Emilia asked shyly.
- Thoth is the god of wisdom and scripture in ancient Egypt, Kristian explained.
 He's depicted as being a man with the head of an ibis. The predictions say that Thoth is ascending and by following him our turnover will increase.
- Are you absolutely sure about this? the CEO pressed Kristian.
- The prediction that was made using the new recommendations is absolutely clear. The financial department has checked the calculations three times.
- Then it's settled, the CEO said and took the winged hat off his head.
 Unless the other board members have something to say, we will start following the new strategy immediately.

The board members nodded and the CEO closed the weekly meeting.

– So it's Thoth we worship now, Samuli blurted out when we walked out of the meeting room. – Last year it was the Greek Dionysus, the year before that Odin from Scandinavia. Dionysus was fine in the sense that the weekly meetings had as much wine as you could drink. This quarter year magiconomics does not lead to long- term development, though. We should count on our own Finnish values and follow Ukko the Great God.

I mumbled something and left for lunch. After lunch I got another coffee from the machine. I saw through the coffee room window how the buck of Mercury was being dragged to the butcher's truck. For some reason I felt sorry for the animal. It had been with the company for a little over six months and now it was ready to be slaughtered. After a while a van with the text Messengers of Gods drove to the yard. The men carried out a huge statue of Thoth to the lobby. Soon after that pieces of the statue of Mercury were carried back to the van. One of the men threw the loose head of Mercury into the van and then came back to get more pieces. The statue had stood in the lobby for less than a year and it had been carried away because the company hadn't gained enough by following Mercury. Most likely the statue was to be melted down and recast into a statue of a more successful god.

I heard the quiet melancholic song from the coffee machine again. I realized that the vetehinen would perish in a few months, after which it would be thrown away, too. It would most likely be fed to the molok in waste management. I started pondering how long I would be useful to the company and when would I be taken to the butcher, carried away to be melted down or thrown to the molok. I could not finish my coffee so I poured it away and decided I had to do something. I did not know how I could save myself but at least I could save the vetehinen.



- Do we have a hacksaw and pliers? I asked Kalevi.
- Look in the toolbox, Kalevi replied. What're you going to do with them?
- I need them for something tonight, I answered vaguely and searched the toolbox. Soon I had what I needed on my desk for the night.

I spent the rest of the day taking care of the usual issues. There were small problems here and there. The whisperer in Emilia's computer had gone dark and could not connect to the aethernet. As I fixed the computer, Emilia complained that Kristian had assigned her so

many tasks that she might have to work overtime. The daemon in the logistics storage server had to be updated. I ordered some more mercury. One of the lightbringer daemons in the meeting rooms had an eye inflammation that needed to be treated so it would not project blurry images.

As the evening turned to night the building started to quiet down. I slipped into a meeting room to read the latest issue of Netherworld Computing Weekly. When I finally thought everyone had gone home I stepped into the dark corridor and listened carefully. It was quiet. Halfway down the corridor light shone through a single office door. I sneaked up to the door and glanced in. Emilia was immersed in her work and did not notice me. I walked on and decided to carry on with my plan. I was sure that Emilia would not hear the sound of what I was doing in the coffee room on the other side of the building. Instead of taking the elevator, I took the stairs to the basement.

When I opened the door to our office I saw something I did not expect. Kalevi sat by his desk slurping something from a bottle. At first, I thought it was blackcurrant juice. Kalevi drank hungrily and spilled some red liquid on his shirt. I realized it was blood. Now I understood the reason behind Kalevi's behavior and looks. Kalevi startled when he noticed me.

- I thought you'd gone home, he explained. I was starving so I couldn't wait any longer.
- I have one thing to take care of, I said. Are you a vampire? Is that why you never leave this place?
- Yes, I am, Kalevi answered and looked
 embarrassed. I got bitten a few years ago on
 vacation. I've kept it a secret because I don't want
 people to be afraid of me or to mock me. They would
 all think I want to bite them. People are so prejudiced!
 They all think that vampires lurk in public toilets
 looking for some random victims so they can suck
 the blood out of them. Luckily our office is down in
 the basement so I can keep on working. If this were
 common knowledge, I'd probably be fired.
- Isn't that illegal? You can't discriminate against people because of their supernatural orientation. By the way, why do you wear those ridiculous glasses?
 Don't vampires have extraordinary eyesight and hearing?

- The CEO is conservative and might just fire me despite the consequences, Kalevi sighed. And my eyesight... I accidentally got holy water in my eyes. My nephew got upset at his christening when they poured the water on him. He wriggled so much that his godfather dropped him in the baptismal font and the holy water splashed everywhere. Before you ask, yes, vampires can enter churches. It's slightly uncomfortable but it doesn't kill you.
- I'm not going to tell anyone, I said. My cousin is a werewolf so I know how difficult it is to belong to a minority. It's really hard for him to rent a flat. The landlords think he'll get his fur everywhere and make it impossible to rent the flat to someone allergic after he leaves.
- So what are you still doing here exactly? Kalevi asked.
 - I have this one thing...
- Obviously it's a moonlighting job? You can do all of your IT support tasks during the day and you don't usually need that equipment for them.
- It's not something that illegal. It's better that you don't ask any more questions.

Kalevi shrugged and sat down to drink the rest of the blood. I put the tools into my backpack, wished him a good night and continued on to the stairway.



The lights were still on in Emilia's office and I heard someone talking loudly. I crept to the door and took a look inside. Kristian was there dressed as an ancient Egyptian priest. He had chased Emilia into a corner.

- Don't be so reluctant, he grunted.
 I can arrange a promotion for you. I told the CEO that we have to follow Bastet as well. She's the goddess with a cat head and if you're a nice pussycat I can assign you to be her priestess. You would get a better salary and a company car.
 - You're a pig with a human head! Emilia screamed.
- Keep your hands off of me!
 - You can scream all you like, Kristian stated calmly.
- Nobody's going to hear you.
 I could have continued on to the coffee room.

Instead I took the pliers from my backpack and stepped inside the room. Both Kristian and Emilia stared at me.

- What are you doing here, nerd? Kristian wondered.
- Bug off, costume creep, I blurted out. Can't you see that Emilia's not interested.
- These are the clothes of the high priest, Kristian
 hissed. And this is none of your business.

I lifted the pliers up and threatened him with them but Kristian just grinned.

 You're no match for me, Kristian said. – I know jujutsu. Today I'll kick your ass and tomorrow I'll get you fired.

Quite soon after that, I noticed that I was on the floor and Kristian was twisting my arm so that it hurt.

 Go home, you nerd, Kristian said. – Or else I'll dislocate your arm.

Emilia picked up the pliers I had dropped on the floor and took a step towards Kristian. Kristian noticed her and twisted my arm even more. I cried out in pain. Emilia hesitated.

All of a sudden, the twisting stopped and Kristian was rising up in the air. He struggled as Kalevi held him up in the air with his left hand. Only I knew why Kalevi had such strength for such a lanky guy.

- I heard strange noises all the way in the basement
 and thought there might be some problems here, Kalevi
 said. It seems like I was right.
- You couldn't have heard a thing from there,
 Kristian shouted.
 You're just the same kind of perverted sneak your friend here is, stalking us in the dark. I'll get all of you fired!
- I think you won't be getting anyone fired, Kalevi announced.
 I really did hear the noise you were making all the way down in the basement and I will tell you how.

Kalevi whispered something in Kristian's ear. Kristian stopped struggling and turned pale. I knew that vampires have excellent hearing, but Emilia was confused.

- I'll go to the basement and discuss this with
 Kristian, Kalevi said. I think he'll apologize to you tomorrow and might even get you a raise.
- You're not going to... I began, but Kalevi interrupted me.
 - I'm just going to have a serious talk with him,

Kalevi said.

Kalevi disappeared down the hallway with the whining Kristian.



Emilia looked at me curiously but I just shrugged.

- Maybe it's best to go home, I said. - It's late.

Emilia agreed. She put her coat on, turned off the computer and the lights in her office and headed to the elevator

- Aren't you going home? she asked.
- I forgot the macaroni casserole I brought for lunch in the coffee room fridge, I replied hastily.
 I'll eat it and then head home. Its expiration date's today and I don't want to take it back home.
- Do you always eat your food with pliers? Emilia kept on asking.

I got so confused that I did not know what to say. Finally I decided to tell the truth.

Emilia listened as I told her about the vetehinen and explained why I wanted to set it free.

- Let's go then, Emilia said.
 I'll keep watch at the coffee room door so no one can sneak up on us. Nobody should be working anymore but the security guard might show up at any time.
 - Why do you want to help me?
 - I've also heard the vetehinen sing.

We walked to the coffee room and Emilia stood guard by the door. The vetehinen sang its melancholic song again. It took a while to open the front panel on the coffee machine. The vetehinen stopped singing. I sawed off the water pipes because I did not know how to detach the filter in any other way. I put the filter in my backpack and we took the bus towards the park.

We got off by the park and walked to the river behind it. The city lights reflected off the dark waters. We found a quiet place where I took the water filter from my backpack. I twisted the cover off with the pliers and looked inside. The vetehinen stared up at me frightened.

 Don't be afraid, little one, I said and released the vetehinen into the river. The vetehinen dove under the surface without looking back and disappeared.

- What do you think will happen to it? Emilia asked.
- If it manages to stay away from boat propellers and slip through the turbines of the factories by the river, it may reach the ocean, I replied.
- I wonder what kind of songs the vetehinen will sing when it swims free on the ocean waves, Emilia said quietly.

She took my hand and we silently looked at the nocturnal river.

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aara's earliest memory was of ants drinking her mother's blood. It would take years for her to recall it consciously. The large coin-sized droplets were like buttons dropped on the dusty, dry ground. Round, bright red, smooth, starting to slowly curdle on the edges. There was a fine frill circling each droplet – small black ants, forming a beautiful ring around them, a steady queue of small insects coming in to drink and heading back out with their ant bellies full of warm blood.

It was a bright, sunny day, and the sky looked impossibly blue and high. Saara lifted her gaze up to her father, who stood on the farmhouse yard, sweaty and wearing just a pair of worn, paint spattered jeans. He breathed in fast, noisy gasps that made his chest heave, and stared at Saara's mother who lay crumpled on the cool grass, the handle of a bread knife jutting from her chest. There were dark patches of blood on her pink dress. She wasn't moving.

The skin on Saara's face felt sticky and raw from the crying, and her nose ran.

But the ants, where were they coming from? Saara slapped her hand down on the ochre coloured dust.

In spite of the hot sunshine, the ground felt cool and solid. The ants didn't seem to mind her slap, they kept on lapping up the blood, their mandibles and antennae twitching.

Saara got on her feet, feeling wobbly. The line of ants vanished into tall grass, heading towards the forest. Father moved, which got Saara's attention. She watched him turn and walk towards the cow shed, his broad shoulders shaking. Saara didn't follow his last steps that ended in a noose, but turned towards the forest instead.

Where were the ants going? She had to know.

Saara never made it to the tree line, thanks to the neighbours, who had been alerted by all the shouting and screaming.

ifteen years later Saara watched a line of ants walking over the chest of her lover Pasi, who snored lightly, deep in drunken sleep next to her. It was a sunny late autumn day. Gusts of wind tugged at the trees, and made their way through the open window, just on this side of being too cold. Saara had turned 18 the previous day, and she had

been released from the foster home. This was her first proper apartment and her first proper boyfriend. Lover. Whatever.

The ants gave Saara a shiver of disgust. For a moment she thought she could smell dust and grass in the autumn air, which made her chest feel tight. The little black insects wove their way around the hairs on Pasi's chest, and vanished somewhere between the mattresses. Saara got up faster than she meant, without realizing why she had to get out of the bed right there and then, out of the reach of the little crawling things. She padded to the kitchen feeling shaky from last night's drinking. Pasi grunted something in the bedroom as she turned on the tap and ran the water until it was cool. When she got back, Pasi had turned around. He was lying on his stomach, which had demolished the path of the little insects. There were a few stragglers on the bed sheets, looking lost and confused.

It was the fourth floor, how the heck had they gotten in?

asi was long gone, and Pekka was bitching about Saara to the marriage councillor. Saara kept staring at the windowsill in the psychologist's office, not really paying any attention to Pekka's invective about her being distant, aloof, not committed to the relationship and being emotionally unavailable.

The late summer sunlight poured in through the windows, throwing huge shadows of the plants to the white wall of the room. The councillor nodded in sync with Pekka's diatribe.

There was a queue of ants coming into the room from somewhere behind one of the flowerpots. Saara frowned and tried to move so she could see where they were coming from, which got the attention of the councillor.

Never mind how they got in – where were the ants going? The insects vanished into the shadows under the windowsill.

The councillor spoke to Saara, but she didn't pay attention. Her eyes wandered on the corners of the room, until she made out the line of small black insects heading towards the door.

She got up and left the room without a word.

Eight years later, on a cool and sunny autumn morning, Saara stood for an hour just staring at her dead baby girl in the crib. Fragile little maggot-like thing, lips blue and skin turning slowly purple. A cot death. Wei was at work, and Saara didn't know whom to call.

The ants made their way into the crib, and started lapping at what moisture remained in the baby girl's eyes and mouth. They gave her a second set of eyelashes.

In the evening, when the paramedics had taken the baby away, Saara went berserk. She cleaned and disinfected the whole apartment, peering under every piece of furniture, behind the radiators and between the trims and the walls looking for the ants and killing them all. Wei was trying to hug her and comfort her, but she pushed him away. She wanted out of the apartment, out of the damn sweltering concrete canyons of Singapore, which had been looming over her for years. She wanted lakes, soft fresh spring grass, trees – a cool and dark forest where to escape the sunlight.

The thought made her squeal with disgust and hurl the can of pesticide to the other side of the room, a reaction that surprised even herself.

Saara followed the line of ants to a light switch. When she opened the screws holding the plastic cover to the wall, it fell off by itself and poured clumps of dry, electrocuted little insects all over her hands and the floor.

decade later in Cambodia, somewhere north of Kaoh Preah, the rain was hammering the roof of the old cargo container that had been turned into an impromptu hospital. Saara shook with fever, although it was over +30C outside and much hotter in the small hospital room. The thunder was like a series of explosions, no pause at all between the lightning and the sound.

The wounds on Saara's legs and arms were badly infected. Necrotizing fasciitis. Not a good way to go.

The room smelled of stale sweat, diarrhoea and sickness, and when the wind shifted, it pushed in the muddy scent of the river and the churned earth from outside.

Someone moaned in the bed next to Saara's, but she didn't pay any real attention to it anymore. Most of the other patients were probably dead; it had been two days since she had seen any of the medical personnel.

The line of ants vanished behind the yellowed and crusty bandages on her forearm, the discharge on them the colour of ochre. The wounds had stopped hurting, and Saara's limbs felt numb and stiff. The ants walked in and out through the small holes and creases in the bandages. This made Saara chuckle, which came out as a dry rattle. Finally she realized it all.

Earlier Saara had moved her arm just to see if she could, which had closed the hole the ants were using, leaving one of them pinned between the fabric and her flushed flesh. Saara had moved again, freeing the ant, and giving its compatriots better access to her. Her legs tingled, there must be a lot of traffic there.

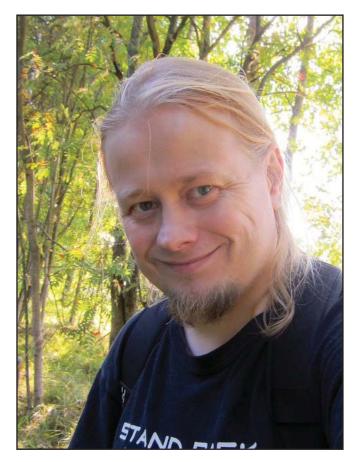
What a total, utter, ironic relief to finally realize where you had been heading all through your life. The ants climbed over the creases of the soiled bed sheets towards the edge of the bed, but just before they reached it, they turned towards the foot of the bed and the door.

For the twentieth time in the last few days Saara made a solemn decision to get up right now and follow them. She had to know where they were going. Just like before, she closed her eyes instead and fell into delirious dreams of ochre coloured dust, red buttons and pink dresses.

This time she finally got to follow the ants into the cool and shadowy forest, away from the scorching sun of the farmstead yard.

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Janos Honkonen is a Finnish author in his early 40's. He writes in Finnish and English and has so far published a novel, a comic, a number of short stories, non-fiction and scores of articles. Talking about his work history, "motley" is a fair modifier to use. It spans such fields as linguistics, media, healthcare, film industry, games industry, sniffing acetone and scientific diving. Janos is currently working on two novels, a game, a movie script for international audiences, and various other projects. Website: http://vornaskotti.com/ Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/janos.honkonen.page





y name is Malia Jafri and I've got two healthy legs. My respiratory muscles are in tip-top shape. According to my documents I am 44 kilos, 154 cents and *nullipara*. That means I have never given birth, so there must be something dreadfully wrong with me. (That's not the reason why I am here, though.) Obviously I'm not allowed to read those papers myself, but I was able to get my hands on them. I'm not stupid enough to hide anything under the mattress, even a moron knows to look there.

The papers know I come from a Sayyid bloodline, no psychiatric illnesses in the family. Dad always has to chime in with the Sayyid, as if it made me a better person. That even though I'm not right in the head, there is still something good and precious about me, his excellent Shiite heritage, even though as a female I will never be able to spread that wealth to future generations.

"Eldest brother and two cousins from father's side survived paralytic poliomyelitis. Second cousin from mother's side died from bulbar poliomyelitis." Actually not a second cousin, but whatever. In the papers I am Malia Jafri, but most doctors and nurses call me Miss Iron Lung. Some pronounce it stonily, others almost with tenderness, as a pet name. Yesterday a new nurse asked me where the name comes from. It's a long story, I said, but it goes back to a hobby horse.

That summer I was five. 1968 was the worst polio season in the sixties, almost 200,000 deaths worldwide. One day I played kokla chapak in Karachi with my second-cousin-who's-not-really-my-second-cousin and his siblings, a few days later he was dead. I was so devastated that I was given his hobby horse, after it was heated in the oven to kill all the viruses. Back then I didn't know that viruses cannot die, as they have never been alive. My mom lived, like all mothers in the world, in a constant fear of loss. We were fed Ayurvedic herbs, even though everyone knew they were useless. The hobby horse I still have, provided that no one has thrown it away.

Officially the story begins in October 1.5 years ago. That's when I sneaked into a tank respirator in the pulmonary ward, a story I've been asked to recount here

many times. I've always excelled at talking to people, everyone else but Dr. Hamirani, who is the reason why I am here.

Even long before that incident I spent all evenings after school by Faisal's side, often with both of us reading books or watching cricket on television. I hate cricket, but watching it is nothing compared to having to lie day after day in a huffing cylinder which even engulfs your hands. Sometimes I borrowed my sister's Walkman and we rocked to Urdu pop. The nurses popped in several times to remind us that this is not a discotheque but a hospital. My insistence that the moves would help rehabilitate Faisal's badly dystrophied neck muscles fell on deaf ears. I was no longer allowed there outside of visiting hours.

I daydreamed about getting to try out an iron lung myself. That I could understand what my husband's life was like. He wasn't up to discussing it much. I toyed with the idea, but probably didn't seriously consider it. Then one machine became free in the room next to Faisal's and I couldn't resist the temptation. It wasn't the only unused respirator in the hospital, so my occupancy wouldn't block it from anyone in actual need.

Nurse Mahnoor declined at first. She feared ending up in trouble, which is hardly any wonder. I promised her I wouldn't tell anyone. That's how I've managed to persuade people into all kinds of things. I look them in the eye, smile sweetly and promise I will never tell, and I wouldn't. No one cares about following the rules, only about getting caught. Except Hamirani of course, but I didn't know him yet. In Hamirani's opinion I'm pretty much a hopeless case.

The previous user of this particular machine had passed away, Faisal informed me. Allah yerhamak, I said and climbed in. From Mahnoor's face I saw that she was already regretting this. Maybe she figured it would teach me a lesson.

Our rooms were handily located in the inner corner of the backyard of the hospital. When the windows were open we could yell at each other. Faisal said that the worst thing about an iron lung is that you can't escape the humming and sighing sound, so I tried to speak as much as I could, even when I had nothing to say. I talked about my studies, even though Faisal understood as little about it as I do about cricket. In three days you can get your throat hoarse and talk yourself empty many

times, but you just go on.

It's hard to speak while a machine is breathing for you. Normally one paces their exhales and inhales to match their speech and suddenly it works the opposite. That was the nastiest part. I was denied such a basic freedom, the freedom to breathe when I wanted to. The freedom not to pay attention to my own breathing, breathing that was no longer mine.

That freedom was also taken away from over 200 others in that ward. The floor is a symphony of iron lungs. Many people do make it out alive. Most only need a few weeks of ventilatory support. For me even three days felt like an eternity. I thought that maybe my breathing mechanisms would wither and I would need to spend the rest of my life in there for real.

Some people do. Several people in this hospital have spent 30 years or more in an iron lung, since the 1950s. Before I was born. The doctors assume I don't understand. That I think Faisal is going to get better. I know this well and Faisal knows, too. His mother doesn't know and doesn't want to. Faisal's mother prays constantly. The families of all these patients pray, thousands upon thousands of du'as call for God's healing, but even God does not resuscitate dead neurons. He is waiting for us humans to do that.

Faisal's room is two floors up from here. Nasim and Aisha take my letters and hand them to other nurses, who take them to Faisal and he dictates them short messages in reply. Sometimes they forget the notes in their pockets and I have to wait many days for a response. I write my own messages in Sindhi, as most nurses only speak Urdu.

Sometimes I, too, pray to God, not for healing but for strength for Faisal to carry on. I can't lay my hands on him, but physically they are still quite close. Then I place my hands on my own temples and ask for strength for myself. And I ask that I will be released.

I pray that I will succeed in developing a vaccine for polio. I firmly believe polio can be eradicated. I have read everything possible on the subject, I know where Salk and Sabin screwed up. Sabin, of course, went wrong from the beginning. Live poliovirus! At least Salk tried to inactivate his virus.

I even dream about enteroviruses. They are colorful knobby blobs, like in my textbooks. They roll and bobble and I have to run after them on endless downward slopes. Luckily they never roll uphill.

For Hamirani this is my illness. Delusional disorder, only a notch below schizophrenia. I am delusional, like I was told in my own village. It's not possible to eradicate poliovirus and it's too dangerous to even attempt it, as thousands of people paralyzed by the vaccines show. "What next? A vaccine for HIV!" Hamirani said and roared with laughter.

According to Hamirani there are plenty of people who think they can cure polio. Some are Hindu gurus, but most are young women. Their minds cannot cope with the reality of one relative after another getting sick and dying, needing a wheelchair or a cane or delegating their respiration to a massive vacuum pump. Their sisters, their husbands, their children. Maybe my psyche is equally disturbed.

I'm not the only one in this ward who believes in a cure for polio. One woman was already here before I came in. A few others have begun to listen to me. Of course, I am the only one of us with a bachelor's degree in microbiology. I cannot sit any exams in the hospital, but sometimes Aisha borrows me books from the library. I keep everything hidden in a plastic bag in the ventilator tract. Every now and then I find rat feces on top of it.

The knobby balls must be inactivated so that there is no possible way for them to retain their virulence. That probably requires both chemical and physical inactivation. An adjuvant is likely needed, too. That one might be found in Ayurveda.

Polio vaccine is an ugly word. People have accepted that polio is a fact of life and will always be. But somehow, somewhere I will find someone to borrow me a lab. Someone who is desperate, but hasn't yet completely lost hope.

Perhaps my hope is in vain, perhaps I'm wrong. Maybe polio cannot be cured. I know I cannot be cured. When I lose my hope, Faisal believes in me. I dig up the letters he has dictated and devour his words in a strange handwriting.

Dr. Hamirani often comes to check on me when I take my meds. He suspects I don't swallow them, and

I don't. Small capsules I can stuff between the gums and cheek. Tablets I press against the palate with my tongue and they stick there. I fear that some day a tablet drops or Hamirani switches me to a liquid formulation.

Hamirani has hinted that I might need shock treatment. He believes its dangers have been greatly exaggerated. This hospital uses anesthesia and the therapy usually has no serious side effects. Memory may be lost permanently, though. Hamirani drops it off it like a minor detail. Like memory wasn't a part of a person as much as any organ. I'd rather keep my memory than my breathing. Hamirani hopes I will drop my absurd delusions of grandeur voluntarily. If not, maybe he can use electricity to drive them out of me. Maybe I can pretend to get well. If everything else fails, I will take an overdose of the meds I have stashed.

As much as I hate Hamirani, I also feel sorry him. He suffers from post-polio syndrome himself, he thinks no one knows. Probably caught polio as a kid and got off easily, left leg is weaker but barely anyone notices. But you can see how exhausted he is at the end of the day. At least I do. His face turns rigid and his speech begins to jam, sometimes he only communicates in grunts. Even his blinks become longer, to give him even short moments of rest.

Hamirani fears that someone will cure polio.

Faisal and I are not too badly off. I will cope as long as I can avoid the pills and shocks. We have each other, with only two floors between us. I will get out of here. I will complete my PhD. One day the world will be free of polio and we will figure out a way to revive old neurons. Every iron lung in Pakistan and the whole world will be wheeled to museums and trash heaps. Faisal will be an old man then, I will be an old woman. We will watch cricket together on a big television screen, bowls of his mom's chana chaat in our hands. One day I can embrace him again. Insha'allah.

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About the author: Maija Haavisto is a Finnish author, playwright, journalist and medical writer living in Amsterdam. Disability and chronic illness are recurring themes in her work - though her recently published fifth novel Sisimmäinen (The Innermost) focuses on the intelligence and inner life of sheep. She is working on a novel set in the Finland of the near future.

Note from the author: This alternative history timeline is not so far-fetched. After the administration of Jonas Salk's famous polio vaccination had began in the United States in 1955, live poliovirus was found in batches of vaccine from several different pharmaceutical companies. The most infamous was the polio vaccine produced by Cutter Laboratories, which paralyzed at least 51 and killed five of its recipients. Vaccine-originated poliovirus also infected close contacts of the vaccine recipients, of which more than a hundred were paralyzed. It has been estimated that up to 120,000 children were exposed to live, virulent poliovirus through a vaccine manufactured by Cutter.



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TEARS FOR THE SEA BY J.S. MERESMAA

Translation: Greta Katz

Looking from shore, the sea is dark. The memory of a storm is evident on the drying sand and on stones licked smooth by waves: tattered fish nets, seaweed, trunks of drift wood, whelks, and clams, which have already started their slow journey back to the sea. The smell of the deep feels stronger than before and the wind swirls sharp enough to raise tears in eyes. A woman stops at a rock on the beach and lays a jute sack beside her feet. She doesn't feel the wind nor smell the sea.

She has come because the clouds are thinning and the sky is growing lighter. The horizon that distinguishes sky and sea apart with one insecure line, is still empty.

The woman, whose hair has last been washed when boots of a man still stood by the front door; whose fair hair still shows a hopeful shine of youth; whose clothes are the same tone as the quieted sea. She opens her bundle and starts to set things on the rock. A comb, a pipe, tobacco in a tin, a photo in a wooden frame, a tin soldier, and a pile of clothes that reveal sown patches more obviously than she would care to admit. With the last item her fingers tremble slightly: woollen socks, the ones she mended only yesterday or maybe the day before that, the ones she was supposed to finish up before winter fall, too big for her.

She looks out to the sea. Stirring foam heads have turned into roughness. The noise of seabirds echoes from the base of the cliffs as they snatch morsels of food washed ashore. Hungry beaks snap. The rushing, even murmur of the waves pressing onto the rocks is in her ears, head, and inside. High tide wipes and shatters, but it will not break through. It will not break through.

The woman picks up the comb from the rock. With her leg bend behind, she throws it into the crushing waves.

Her tail churns water. Against a black wall of the shore, a current flows in a continuous manner. Her movements are lazy and languid. From above the horizon light glimmers through, and its rays seek their way down from the surface. Close to the wall the rocks are more plentiful. She moves along the bottom gathering mollusks, clams, and crayfish, which have been stunned by the milling of the waves. On her shoulder a sack woven from the nets of fishermen, is filled with gifts from the storm. Her fingers move seaweeds aside. Her nose quivers and her eyes, that have been adjusted to the dark, keenly investigate every rock and hole, nook, crack, and cranny.

She gets startled and pulls back when something heavy and shiny falls on the rock in front of her. Tiny air bubbles escape upwards, as the object settles next to a tuft of seaweed. She picks it up with her fingers that are connected up to the middle joint by a thin membrane. She sniffs and tastes the object, but wrinkles her nose in confusion. When lifted closer to the light, it shimmers like darkened silver. The shape of it reminds her more of creatures that wander on dry land. She cuts a piece of stringy seaweed off with her sharp teeth, wraps the item in it, and lays it in her sack.

The surface of the water breaks again. Intrigued, she looks up. Something flat and oval falls towards her followed by a stream of air bubbles. The sack falls down slowly off her shoulder and onto the sandy seabed. With one stroke of her tail fin she reaches the object, takes it in her hand and sees another image of land-dwellers, only this time in a flattish form, from which one cannot feel figure against skin. Her nose tells this is as unsuitable for eating as the previous one, yet her curiosity has been awakened. She swims back to her assortment of treasures, slides the flat object next to the seaweed wrap, wedges the sack in a hole between two rocks, and kicks toward the light.



When the sea has swallowed the last item and the man's clothing has disappeared beneath the surface, the woman kneels on the rock as the last wave brings up all that has been held in and hidden. She presses her face in her hands, pulls her hair, and screams. The horizon is still empty — a coatrack is empty, a dresser's bottom drawer is empty, and she has nothing to fill them with.

The woman pounds her chest, hammers the bony cage protecting her heart, and wonders; why does one need walls if drafts find their way through doors; what good is a breakwater when waves find their way around it anyway; why does one need rib bones when they don't protect from sorrow after all?

For nothing, for nothing, she mended and cooked, washed and scrubbed, loved, and waited, and wished. For nothing. The sea took what God gave, and she hates it, hates its sound and infinity and two-facedness. She hates its coldness that even midsummer's sun doesn't expel.

A song rolls ashore. It rises from the cracks of rocks, finds its way through the rush of the breaking waves and the woman, trembling, tries to stop crying. She has heard of caves where the wind goes to sing, but knows that this isle doesn't have any. She turns her head around to locate the source of the sound. She lays on her stomach and looks down to the point where water and land meet. She sees an oval face and milk-white arms that lean on a rock. Black hair fans out on the creature's scaly back. A small mouth is open and the song, lyric-less yet sweet, rises toward her.

They share a look, and the woman knows the song is for her.



The creature smells the land-dweller's tears and she smells them for they are of earth, not of the deep. A whimper that makes the woman's throat twitch, brings shivers onto the creature's skin and she is filled with heaviness. She is only one swift kick away from the dry land. Underneath her tail she feels the beginning of the rising shoreline. Her scales scrape the coarse seabed and a fleeting fear slices through her. Up there is a dangerous place, land has dried up too many of them.

She recognises the woman's feeling. She understands more from a voice than many others of her kind. When whales travel by her home lair, she swims with them as far as she dares and sings with them. Learning their stories and listening to their sorrows and joys, she hears of things and creatures in far away seas.

The land-dweller's singing isn't melodic like whales' song. It is jumpy and raspy. It is noise that is let loose when there is too much pain. She begins a comfort song, and the woman quiets down. The land-dweller hears her and soon her pallid face peeks from behind a rock, a face

with an oddly large nose and small eyes.

The creature sings for a while, but clouds in the sky are only thin veil now and the light rising behind the isle appears as blinding wands. Rising a hand on her heart, she bends backwards and dives. Her tail goes up last, as a greeting, and she is buried by the wallowing waters.



The woman returns to the shore the next morning, wanting to hear the song again. It was the very first thing in her mind upon waking, the song that wrapped her in a mist where one knows none other than peace. Instead of climbing on the rock, from where she only yesterday threw things into the sea, she goes down to the shore. Black stones, the size of fists, slip under her shoes. Seaweed yellowed by the sun snaps and brakes as she makes her way to the shoreline. She squats at the point where the largest waves just reach to kiss the tips of her well worn shoes. The light is grey, the sea different from yesterday. The woman smells its salt and indifference. She sinks her fingers into the damp, cold sand. Closes her eyes, clears her throat, and starts to sing.

She sings all that she knows, everything she heard from her mother's lips as a child and later on a hard church bench. She sings until her voice breaks, until tiny grains of sand prickle her throat and her tears have run dry. Finally, out of words, she fumbles for the tune of the song she heard for the first time only yesterday.



Yesterday, on the way back to her nest, she discovered the reason the land-dweller was crying. Because of a helm and an anchor, bits of broken timber fallen to pieces and things she couldn't name. She had been picking these items up as she sang in raptured misery. Her arrival briefly disturbed the other creatures around the carcass of the boat, but soon she was left to her own devices. She followed her nose

and found a couple of male land-dwellers, empty-eyed and lifeless, further away from the wreck. She was able to recognise one land-dweller's face from the flat, oval picture which she had brought to her nest earlier. She pressed her palm against the male's lifeless chest and sang of the land-dweller who mourned him so, who wanted to give him all of the necessities to bring across to the other side.

She returns to investigate the body again the next day. Sharks have visited. Huge chunks are missing from the bodies. A glint of metal catches her eye. She bites off the swollen finger and removes the well-worn ring the man was wearing, slips it onto her own thumb. The current next to her is strong, and she knows that those caught in it will never be found. She grabs the male's corpse and shoves it towards the current, watches as the torn clothing sways in the water; how the current grabs the male, and hurries it toward the darkness where no light ever reaches.

Suddenly she hears a thin voice from far above.

Recognising her own coo-song, she abandons her sack of treasures and swims toward pearl grey light.



A head appears from the waves. The woman sees it clearer than the first time. The stunted little nose, the big light-coloured eyes, the seaweed-like hair, oddly green and velvety. Her voice dies on her chapped lips.

The mermaid is near, not more than two arm-lengths away. It looks at her, as it bobs up and down with the movement of the sea. She notices that the lips framing a tiny mouth are colourless and that it doesn't have ears like she does. The world grows silent, only the sounds of the sea between them as they cautiously examine each other. If some fear is present in the woman, it is a fear of this moment ceasing to exist. Her heart emptied by sorrow is full again, full of wonder and enchantment; for a moment not only tears flow in her, but her blood is warm again. A cautious smile quivers on her lips, an attempt to send a message to the creature, whose foreignness all of a sudden is more familiar than the home now filled with emptiness. The mermaid moves. The woman bolts, afraid it might disappear into the depths that already swallowed everything dear to her. As the creature comes closer she sees the bulge of its scaly tail under the surface,

reminiscent of full nets, hauling a bounty of silvery fishes into the sunlight.

Colourless lips crack open a little and some knot inside the woman loosens as well, makes room for the comfort that the song carries with it. The tune is a variation from yesterday, it moves differently, and its ups are sharper and downs deeper. The woman crawls closer to the water, not caring about her skirt or shoes, now soaked by the seawater. She stops when only timidity separates them. In a moment, when a little break occurs in the mermaid's song, she lets her own voice weave in. Together they sing in the morning light, which appears as fragile and luminous as the harmony of intertwining voices.



The creature feels the nearing dawn first on her sensitive eyes. The shared song flows reliant only on the land-dweller for a while, until she also grows quiet. The silence is broken only by the soft sound of wet sand fizzling and the distant shrieks of seabirds. She quickly dunks her head under the surface, rises up again and enjoys the sliding water's embrace. Her skin is made for the sea, it endures darkness and depth, and the stings of burning tentacles, but sun and dryness it cannot survive.

The land-dweller looks at her with the same strange glare on her face, an expression that lifts the corners of the mouth and narrows eyes. She assumes this expression means good, not bad. After all the big-nosed land-dweller, with her coral-white hair, is still here. She has an urge to touch the hair but when she lifts her hand, she touches the nose where funny-looking nostrils flare. The land-dweller's dark eyes widen. A sudden burst of laughter springs forth, the land-dweller bolts back and falls onto the wet sand on her butt.

They stare at each other. Soon the land-dweller stumbles onto her knees and wades into the water, closer. The creature doesn't dare to move, doesn't want to frighten the land-dweller who hesitantly grabs her hand and rises it up to her eye-level. The woman's curious eyes notice the webbing between her fingers, the spots covering her thick, slippery skin. Finally the woman's gaze discovers what she was looking for. Long pale fingers, so different yet similar to hers, touch the ring that she had slipped in her thumb before, the ring that belonged to the male swallowed by the

current.

A soft grunt of surprise and loss tumbles out the land-dweller's mouth. The creature picks it up, fits it into her own song. The land-dweller looks at her in amusement. The creature tilts her head, gratified by this new sound. She slides the ring off her finger, presses it into the woman's palm that is pink and covered by thin lines.

She senses that the woman's sorrow is eased, but the break of the day hurts her weary eyes, so she backs away from the frightening land. She looks over her shoulder and dives into the water that closes in around her skin, cooling and familiar.



The woman walks away, the man's ring enclosed in her fist. With every step seawater squirts out of her shoes and dribbles from the hem of her skirt. The droplets draw a line after her conducting the scent of the mermaid back to the house. She smells the sea while brewing evening tea. The scent of seaweed has been absorbed into her pillow. The nightstand is stained by white salt marks under the ring.

As she wakes, she hears the sound of the waves, underneath which lingers a quiet yet audible melody.

The alluring song stays with her through the day. In the evening she pulls the ring off her finger and sets it down on the nightstand next to the man's ring. At nightfall she returns to the shore.



She is waiting by the rocks when the land-dweller's figure is etched on the cliff against the night sky. Her gaze silently follows the woman's slow journey down the faintly moonlit path. As the beach stones clang from her steps the creature closes in, sliding along the black waves. She pauses at a boulder that drops down a whale's length under the water. It stands only two steps away from the shoreline, a perfect spot. The land-dweller's hair mirrors the moon. Her delicate, bony chest moves up and down from the strain. She can already smell the scent that the woman carries on her skin, so soft and different than before, freed from grief.

The creature stays still. The woman wades into the water, her skirt presses onto her slender body like a second skin, wet and cold, like the hands that embrace her and gently pull her below.

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J.S. Meresmaa is a Finnish author of an epic fantasy series named *Mifonki* and a novella trilogy called *The Knights of Central Castle*. She is a founding member of a coop publishing house Osuuskumma, and she has written numerous published short stories as well as worked as an editor.



THE TASTE OF THE RAINBOW

SHIMO SUNTILA

TRANSLATION BY MARIANNA LEIKOMAA

liked the sun, Diurne liked the rain. We both loved rainbows. That's why we became such good friends, back in the day.

On days when the sun was shining and the barometer showed low pressure was on the way, I ran to Tempest Hill. It was completely bare of trees, and so rocky that no-one had ever built anything on it. You could see in every direction from the top, over the fields, all the way to the edge of the forest. If I made it in time, I saw the rain front rushing in from afar.

One day I reached the top of the hill and noticed I wasn't alone. Somebody else had come to enjoy the feel of the incoming rain. I said to him that on days like this, I enjoyed the last rays of the sun, just before the clouds drifted across the sky and hid the sun. My companion, who introduced himself as Diurne, said that he was already waiting for the feeling he got when raindrops tickled his arms and stroked his hair.

The rain approached from the west, over the forest, the direction of the sea. As the gray mass rolled in across the blue, distant drops first stole the color from the forest, then from the fields and faraway buildings. Diurne told me that all colors were washed away into a great underground stash. Sometimes, when the stash overflowed, the colors burst away in a big arch just to flow back into another stash. This was how rainbows were born.

We were silent for a moment. Then I said that rainbows couldn't taste of anything because they were made of water. Water didn't taste of anything, after all, unless you added honey to it. Diurne disagreed.

He thought colors were actually flavors. Plums were violet, so the violet in the rainbow tasted of plums. When I told him blackberries and wood blewits and Nebbiolos were also violet, Diurne just laughed kindly and said that perhaps a part of the violet arch did taste of Nebbiolos. Later I took him to taste them in the vineyard owned by the old man Seetherius.

We didn't argue about most things. If we disagreed about something, we debated it for a while and sometimes even yelled, but if neither of us gave in, we would let it go. We didn't fight over the same topic again, unless one of us had thought of something new to say about it. The only exception was flying. We fought about that often. Diurne believed that humans

could fly, as soon as we figured out the right way to do it. I thought the whole idea was impossible and it was a waste of time to twiddle with it.

We looked at the world through different eyes in many respects. If a matter had two sides, we always chose the opposite ones. Yet, we didn't shy away from even the most horrific things.

I was afraid of heights and lightless spaces. That's why Diurne insisted on climbing the wall of the windmill belonging to gaffer Seetherius, or onto the roof of the Dragonfly church, and once he made us walk for hours in the catacombs without a lantern. Diurne, on the other hand, could not stand spiders. I caught them in the summer and then we let them run across our faces until Diurne couldn't take it anymore and started screaming and tearing them off his face.

Some might have thought our lives were mostly miserable, but without each other, we would not have experienced half of what we actually did. We urged each other to unbelievable achievements and broke our barriers. We always said that fear will only win once you give into it.

y uncle Hoebink was an adventurer. He tended to visit us from time to time, but after a particular visit, we never saw him again. Diurne said that sometimes even adventurers end up in dangerous situations and die, but I preferred to think that my uncle was investigating the secrets of rainforests and climbing on the roof of the world. It was a more comforting thought.

We had never owned cows, but there was a barn in our yard. Its door was shut with a padlock and we were forbidden to go there, but sometimes we went anyway. There was a loose board on the north wall of the barn. If you took the ladder from the side of the house and climbed all to the way up to the loft, you could pull the board aside.

Next to one wall there were statues and masks my uncle had brought from the hot south, cold mountains and other faraway places. Some of the masks were taller than I was. I had trouble imagining the size of the people they were meant for. Diurne said they were giants' masks. According to my knowledge, giants did not exist. Diurne did not deny it, but instead readily admitted that giants did not exist, not anymore. Instead,

he claimed that they had existed, once, but they had become extinct, like the mammoths. There was also a mammoth tooth in the barn and I could not come up with a valid counterargument for the extinction of the giants.

Behind a parting wall, formed of a stretched tarpaulin, were canoes, bicycles and other vehicles. The strangest one was a metallic statue, which looked like a gazelle and which, my uncle had told me, was some sort of an automaton. I wasn't sure what an automaton was, but sometimes its head had turned into another position between our visits, even though I knew nobody had opened the padlock since uncle Hoebink's last visit.

Among the vehicles there was also a basket and a big pile of smooth, pale fabric, which formed a giant sack. It couldn't be a boat as the basket was woven and as such was not waterproof. Diurne thought you could perhaps fly with the basket and the sack, if you filled the sack with something very light. I thought it was such a stupid idea that I joked I would bring in the feathers from my pillow, but Diurne pointed out that they would not fill the entire sack.

s we never argued about the same topic twice, except flying, I was irritated when Diurne sighed that the orange in the rainbow most likely tasted of oranges and purple tasted of plums.

We had woken up early and met on Tempest Hill. It was not long after the sunrise, and the grayish stripe in the south-south-west had turned out to be a raincloud, so we stared approximately to the west, completely still. A rainbow always forms onto the opposite side of the sky from the sun, and never when the sun is high up in the sky. I would've liked to concentrate on noticing the quivering, pale stripes of the color arch first and not to think about whether yellow was lemon or banana. This is why I pointed out, rather dryly, that the color was violet, not purple. If the violet blends in with the red, that results in purple, but the bottom edge of the rainbow blends in with nothing.

Diurne did not reply to this, and for a while I was afraid he was annoyed with me. Then the first color appeared and all the worries in the world were forgotten.

First, we saw the southern end of the arch. We

could see it first against the forest, which was lit by the sun, and it was pale in the beginning, but as the clouds moved the forest fell into shadow and the colors of the rainbow could shine. At this point we could also see the middle of the arch and the richness of the colors pressed against my chest, like a longing I could not express. As the northern arch grew into sight, I wiped my eye in secret. After all, I couldn't cry openly in front of my companion.

I was so enthralled I didn't immediately notice Diurne tapping my arm with his fist. He nodded his chin and it was only then I thought to lift my gaze ten degrees. Doing so, I saw something which we had only seen once before.

Behind the bright, glowing red stripe, there was the night zone, which almost had all light squeezed out of it. The landscape under the rainbow was incredibly brighter than above it. And on top of the night zone, there was a mirror arch.

When we had first seen one, we had been too excited to even look at it. Now we waited and didn't start discussing where it had come from, whether there were two leaks in the color stash, or if the blue in it tasted like blueberries.

The upper arch was dimmer and did not reach quite as far down, and in all respects it would have been a poor copy of the original, if just one thing had not been so remarkable. It was the same shape as all rainbows, but the colors were in the reverse order.

I explained that something was causing the reflection, perhaps there was an invisible mirror in the sky. Diurne argued that if there was a mirror, the arch itself should be upside down, as well.

We stood there for a long time, not saying anything. Then, suddenly, Diurne said that we should go and taste the rainbow.

I thought the idea was absolutely ludicrous. The closest end of the rainbow was somewhere in the forest and we would never make it there before the sun went behind the clouds and the rainbow disappeared. Besides, I thought that rainbows ran away if you tried to catch one. We had tried it once and we ran all the way to the sheep fold of gaffer Seetherius before giving up, utterly exhausted.

Another problem was that often the end of the rainbow seemed to begin in thin air, high above the tree

tops. I certainly didn't want to end up in a situation where I had to jump from the highest branch of a tree and at the same time try to grab onto something which was too high and also trying to get away from me. But Diurne had thought of that, too. We would not run or jump, he said. We would fly.

couldn't sleep that evening until it was late at night. We had worked hard all day, taking the boards off the back wall of the barn and then pulling the basket and the fabric out. I had asked what good would it do us, but Diurne had just smiled mysteriously and said that he'd found something in the barn which might help.

In the morning we were both up right before sunrise, and we met behind the barn. Diurne had dug out some equipment, but first we had to drag the sack of fabric onto the roof of the barn. It was very hard, and even more difficult as we only had one ladder, but finally most of the fabric was on the roof and only the mouth of the sack hung down, above the basket. We had attached the sack to the basket with thick ropes. Good thing the fabric was thin and light because otherwise we would've never got it up onto the roof.

Then Diurne started building some sort of contraption out of his supplies. This was supposed to help us fly. He had a large three-legged skillet which fit into the basket and a thin sheet of sandstone to go under it to prevent it from burning a hole through the bottom of the basket. The basket was not very big and there was little room for us.

The sun was already well on its way up when Diurne finally built a fire on top of the skillet. Then we waited. Finally, we smelled the rain and even though I didn't think the idea could possibly work for so many different reasons, we would probably never get a better chance to taste a rainbow again.

I climbed into the basket and helped to set the logs on fire. The wood crackled happily as in a fire place, but nothing else happened. Diurne jumped over the edge and picked up from the ground a burlap sack, whose smell tickled my nose. I sneezed. There was a picture of a flame woven onto the sack. Then he climbed back into the basket with a dry stick in his hand.

Diurne poked the skillet with his leg so that we both had room to sit. We sat in the basket and stared silently at the flames. For a moment I was afraid the basket would really rise into the air. We would be trapped in the small, open box, many meters from the ground. The mere thought made me dizzy. I leaned against the wall of the basket and pressed my knees against my chest.

Next to me, Diurne had opened the strings of the sack and scooped pale blue powder into his hand. That's when I remembered seeing the sack before, hanging from a hook on the barn wall, half-buried under the pale, large fabric. Before I could ask him what he was doing, Diurne threw a handful of powder into the flames.

The flames rose so high they almost touched the fabric hanging from the roof. Even though it didn't feel very hot, I instinctively closed my eyes and turned my face away. I still managed to see the bright blue flame with a nearly white heart.

After a while, I dared to look around again. Diurne had plucked more powder between his fingers, less this time. I felt like burying my head in my hands, but curiosity got the best of me. Now the flame was more controlled.

Diurne placed the sack between us and told me to throw some powder into the fire. He placed the stick he had brought with him on top of the flames. I picked a pinch of the powder between my fingers. It felt fine, almost like liquid. Timidly I threw a puff of powder on the skillet. The flame was small, but the stick above it was burnt to a cinder. My nose felt the smoke and ashes. I said quietly that it would be a good idea to keep our hands away from the fire.

For a while we just sat there, threw pinches of powder and stared at the sparkling flames. There seemed to be tension in the air, as though before a thunderstorm. I had a warm, queasy feeling in my stomach. I felt something significant was about to happen. Then I heard a rustle, and glanced upwards.

If I hadn't already been sitting down, I would have probably fallen down from amazement. The pale fabric had started to flap and swell. Slowly but steadily it continued to open its folds and balloon like bread dough, except that it kept rolling upward towards the sky. I couldn't say anything; I just stared wide-eyed at the continuously expanding sack which was forming a ball with a pointed lower end.

I cried out when I felt the basket shake. By then the pale sack was already a huge bag filled with nothing but heat. The wind started nudging it towards the south-west. There was a scratching, dragging noise from underneath the basket and then it shook again. Diurne didn't say anything, either, and he had stopped throwing the powder into the fire.

The scratching noise stopped. The shaking stopped. My stomach lurched like it did when we jumped into a stack of hay from the roof of the granary at Seetherius's farm. I looked around, alarmed. The wall and roof of the barn had disappeared.

We both stood up, trembling, and grasped the sides of the basket, which suddenly felt surprisingly flimsy. I gulped, peered over the side of the basket and saw something which, based on its color, could have been the roof of the barn. It got smaller at an alarming speed.

Without letting go of the sides of the basket, I turned to look at Diurne and admitted he had been right. It truly was possible to fly using the basket. I hoped it had been enough and that we could have focused on figuring out how to get back down, but Diurne leaned in and threw more powder into the flames.

I had never been so scared in my entire life, but on the other hand, I was used to being scared. The darkness of an underground basement, climbing on the top of a tree, ants that bite. Compared to those, flying did not seem so wild after all.

We drifted slowly southwest, towards the forest and the grayness which hung above it. I had never realized the forest was so immense. It stretched all the way up to the horizon and if there really was an ocean out there, it was hidden behind the wall of trees and clouds. I tasted the aroma of rain in my mouth, strong as iron. I had to let go of the side while I rubbed my arms with my hands. It was surprisingly cold up there and I was only wearing a sleeveless shirt and a thin jacket. Diurne didn't mind the cold, even though he was not even wearing a coat.

t first it was difficult to see it, but then we made out a veil of dense rain. Diurne had stopped throwing the powder so that we wouldn't rise too high and laughed out loud. I smiled

quietly next to him.

Slowly, the gray stripe grew into a wall and we floated leisurely towards it. Tension rose and, despite the wind, the back of my neck started getting hot. The sun felt nice on my skin. We took each other by the hand and held our breath.

At the same time, majestically slowly, a small sevenstriped strip of color was reflected across the darkness, as though squeezing out of it. We both squealed and for a moment our joy felt no bounds. I was about to burst and fought hard not to cry. Falling in love must feel the same.

Gradually, the arch grew in length. It climbed to its apex and then rolled down towards the ground like paint made out of different colored stripes of quicksilver. Finally, it split the entire sky.

The rainbow was brighter and more colorful than any I had ever seen before. Yet, I did not change my mind. Even though the basket flew, it would still not be possible to catch the rainbow. I didn't, however, want to spoil the moment by arguing, and I still couldn't present any new counterargument. So I remained silent and didn't let go of Diurne's hand.

The wind pressed our heat-filled balloon towards the cloud front. I had been in dense fog before and figured the cloud might feel the same. Diurne had once told me that fog was a kind of a cloud, which had landed on the surface of the earth, but one summer I had seen fog rising from the river. That was the end of that discussion. I was no longer as sure of my opinion, though.

Time lost its significance and there was nothing else in the world except the arch floating in front of the infinite rain cloud. Now I saw that its stripes did not have clear edges, but instead fused together seamlessly. I had once claimed that there were five stripes while Diurne had said there were seven. I had snapped that there might as well be an infinite number of colors, then. Diurne felt that if that really was the case, we could not distinguish the seven stripes. Now I knew I had been right.

Right at that moment I realized I'd been able to see the lack of boundaries between the colors because the rainbow looked larger now. As though we were closer to it than before.

Whenever I felt too tense I got an itch in the crook of

my toes. I curled my toes as if I was trying to grab onto the grass while the rainbow kept floating visibly closer. Soon we would be underneath it. Diurne let go of my hand and threw some more powder onto the skillet. He tossed a good scoop of powder into the flames and for a moment the flames shone as bright as the sun's reflection from the colorful windows of the Dragonfly church.

The flash made small suns and black dots swim in my eyes. I rubbed at them, even though I knew it wouldn't help at all. When I finally could see again, I looked around and couldn't see the rainbow anywhere, not anymore. Diurne was looking up, so I, too, glanced up. There it was.

The display of colors had thinned into a barely discernible crescent. I understood that we were directly under the rainbow. Despite its thinness, the crescent felt immense and it shone through the now-almost invisible fabric of the balloon. I felt cold when I realized we were now very close to the rainbow.

The final puff of powder had fired our basket away as if from a cannon. The edge of the rainbow looked

sharper than a honed knife and I meant to share my fears with Diurne, when our balloon reached the bottom edge of the rainbow.

The balloon kept floating upward and was sliced neatly in half. Our ascent abruptly slowed down and I knew the direction of our basket would soon change. I grasped Diurne tight just as he swung his arm upwards. I heard a beautiful, tingling sound. Then the basket stopped and begun to fall.

I wanted to tell my companion that he had been right, it truly was possible to catch a rainbow by flying, but the words stuck to my throat. I was afraid, but Diurne was smiling. He held me with one hand, and in the other hand he had a shard of something deeply violet and unspeakably thin. He licked it, laughed and then brought it tenderly to my lips.

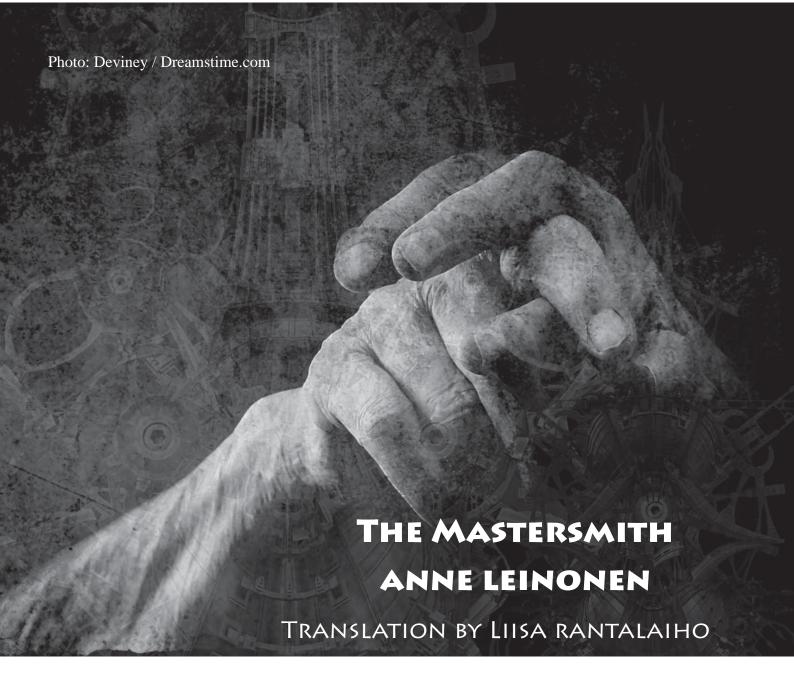
"Taste it", he said. "Plum or blackberry?"

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Shimo Suntila (b. 1973) is a Finnish writer and editor who has published 30 short stories and 160 short short stories, mostly since 2012. His first English publication was short story "Daughters!" in Words withour Borders (Aug 2014). He has appeared in over twenty anthologies but gone solo only once with his book *Sata kummaa kertomusta* (Kuoriaiskirjat 2013)



Photo © Johanna Ahonen



"Work, and if you have no opportunity or no ability, make yourself useful", the radio declared on the windowsill. Valfrid Mastersmith woke up with a start in his chair. Brass slivers from the table were stuck in his beard and his hand had gone numb under his head. It was six o'clock: he'd slept at his work all through the night, once again.

"Work well done is its own reward. Work is the basis of our State's welfare. No citizen needs to lack for daily work. It's time to wake up and start today's work with good cheer."

Though Valfrid was old and bent, his limbs cried for something useful to do. First he had to eat something, however. He put kindling into the kitchen range, lighted the fire and boiled a kettleful of water on the stove. The tin on the shelf contained crusts. Masterworkers had a well-functioning rations service: once a

month Joel, the carter, brought dried meat, bread, sugar and tea, sometimes buns or any other delicacies that Hilda, the village cook, had chanced to make.

He took his tea in slow sips, gnawed at the piece of bread and looked around at his room. The log cabin was ascetic: there was only a small, unmade bed, the workbench and a couple of chairs. A bucket for refuse stood inside the porch: though there was an outhouse in the yard, there were days when he simply didn't have the time to go that far. One corner of the room had a bread oven that Valfrid hadn't used for months now. There were grooves in the floor planks, worn by his chair, drawn towards the table and back again countless times.

The thin curtain dimmed the room to provide suitable illumination for his work. There was a tiny hole in the fabric through which a bright point of light pushed its way into the room. It fell directly on the

workbench. Valfrid stood up and reset the curtain to hide the hole within a fold. His eyes would be dazzled by too much light.

He rubbed his brow and settled his eyeglasses better. He could spend long hours by the table in the same position, and his limbs tended to ache, especially if he was doing several tasks at the same time. His muscles and joints were not as quick to recover as in his youth.

"You're listening to Waves of Diligence, the people's radio station. During the next half-hour we shall take a tour to visit some people at their work and talk about our people's community of fate, of the scientific and work-ethical needs that we all have."

On the shelf was displayed a dusty row of medals and prizes: the merit-wheel of the Instrument Makers, the golden badge of the Theoretical Physicists, the Vigour statue of the Efficiency Society; all of them relics from a time when skilfulness had been highly valued. Nowadays there were real Masters left in only a few villages, and the few experts received requests even from far— away places. The local government was an insatiable employer, and he had as many orders as he could possibly accept.

Valfrid's workbench was full of tiny parts, cogs, slivers of metal and tools for precision mechanics: files, pliers, tweezers, pins for particle transfer and drill pits. A black power cord wound its way over the planks towards the wall socket. Amidst the chaos shone a bronze-hued apparatus the size of two closed fists. The wheels, axles and chains of beryllium and bronze made it a complex work of art whose parts fitted exactly together. Valfrid had now spent a week in making it, and it still wasn't quite ready.

"Every working community needs constructive individuals."

Valfrid shrugged. The work was waiting. His hands didn't shake when he joined the main mechanism into the casing of the clockwork motor mainspring and snapped the joint shut. Everything was in order as far as that was concerned, and he could now solder the spring casing fast. Many would have used an ordinary jet turbine cell or a fusion battery as the power source, but an electric motor was out of the question in this case. This device had to function in spite of a sniffer field of the technological golden age, an adversary that that couldn't be misled even by a Faraday cage.

"In our programme People At Work we are presently visiting the northern parts of our country, the village of

Vilisjao, the home of energetic and diligent people indeed. And what kind of tasks are you carrying out here?"

Now the radio reporter was interviewing a man whose voice squeaked like an old barn door.

- "— It's them chip baskets, that's what, the whole village is famous for these baskets of ours, see. The youngest here, they help us what they can.
- But that's not all you can do, is it? I am now standing by a chirpy little girl. And what is your father making, my girl?
 - Father's winding floater coils in the smithy.
 - And where will those be sent?
 - To the Floater City.
- Indeed, the Vilisjao village has long traditions in the field of antigravity technology; they actually have three master – degree workers living here. – But now we have to interrupt our regular programming briefly for an official announcement."

Valfrid sighed deeply and set down the soldering iron in his hand.

"Citizens! We are answering the anxious inquiries of relatives. Rumours have been spread among the people of an accident involving numerous fatalities in the Sammatin Valley mines. Our Security Police wishes to emphasize that no accident has taken place. The communication with Sammatin Valley has been disrupted by particle storms caused by abundant sunspots. Because of numerous inquiries, a briefing has been organized for those relatives who are still worried about the well-being of their family members. We regret that at this stage we can only invite those who have no pressing work to do. Such family members who are talented and specially Named for their skills should continue with their work. The State Official Information Bureau will be answering all questions after this."

The news ended with the familiar jerky signature tune.

"Attention, skilled workers! The weekly measurement break of the synchronizer pulse is about to commence. Please place yourself in a location with an unobstructed connection to the transmission. Remember that this is a privilege; a high work ethic is to your own advantage."

Valfrid stood up and stepped to the doorway, where he stood with his feet slightly apart. When he opened the door, the landscape overwhelmed him: the heat struck his face, bees were humming in the lilacs, the birds in

the trees were crying in the ecstasy of procreation. A few clouds lay dark and still on the horizon. A lonely low wisp of a cloud was sailing away. There might be rain, but never mind. Rain would not hinder his work. Though Valfrid closed his eyes, he could sense the brightness of the light through his eyelids. There was still a lot of work to do, and he had a feeling that he might have to hurry.

Valfrid yawned and shifted his weight to the other foot; his thoughts strayed back to the task at hand. Would information be transmitted fast enough from the tendril coils back to the intermediating rod set, he wondered. It should, according to his calculations, and maybe he was worrying in vain. But he had been working so long that he might have become dulled by sheer routine, causing miscalculations.

"Thank you, citizens", the voice on the radio said. The programme continued as always with a discussion of work ethic, and Valfrid hurried back to his machine. His hands hovered above the parts, his eyes picking up details that still demanded attention. His fingers wound around the tools and danced within the machinery at an accuracy of micrometres. All the time his brain kept composing the score of the total unit, several work stages ahead of his hands.

But there was an interruption again, as the wall telephone rang noisily. Valfrid picked up the receiver and the microphone, annoyed at the disturbance.

- Mastersmith Valfrid, the operator said.
 Logistician Uffick Punctual is calling you. Do you accept the call?
 - Yes.

A moment of clicking on the lines.

- Well. Good evening. I just wish to make sure that the exotic particles that we sent have arrived.
 - Yes, they have.
- Excellent. If you don't mind, I'd also like to ask when the dilatation field module might be ready for testing? Johan Electro-mechanist from the Progress Institute in Charm Ridge is eagerly waiting for it...
 - It's going to take a while yet.
- Well, never mind. We've always had reason to trust the quality of your work. By the way, did you like the goose-liver paté?
 - It was quite good.
 - As it should be, being prepared by Sigurd

Masterchef himself. We'll return to this business later. Good-bye, Valfrid Mastersmith.

The caller rang off. Valfrid put the receiver back and shrugged. The meal had probably been tasty, Sigurd Masterchef had hardly been named Master for nothing. Valfrid had given the food to his neighbour, Karel Dimwit, who had a family of several children to support. The field module bothered Valfrid a bit; at some stage he'd have to finish it, or they would send an inspector to visit him. Not that any inspector would have an idea of the stage Valfrid's work was at; they'd hardly be able to tell pincers from tweezers.

"Towards evening we may expect partly cloudy weather with thin high clouds in the centre of the country. There is a chance of thunder showers throughout the land. Curfew is in force in the areas where lightning or thunder are observed."

The day passed quickly, and before he noticed, it was time to go to sleep. Valfrid couldn't bear to stop, he had to use all the time he could. Two minutes before the clock struck ten he moved his tools into the middle of the workbench. At the first stroke of the clock he laid his hands on the bare wooden surface and rested his head on them. He ought to have gone to the privy, but it was too late now.

By the tenth stroke he was fast asleep.

He wasn't supposed to have any dreams, but he did, anyway. He was walking in the clear August night; the mist rising up from the folds of the ground was milky soft, winding alongside the low hillocks and wrapping them in consolation. In his dream he was light as a feather and rose above the meadow, soaring over the roofs so high that he saw the whole village and all the people at their work, and everything was so tranquil, so peaceful that you could have heard the chink of a cog falling down. Even the parade of the soldiers marching on the road could not break the calmness: their boots trampled the earth in step, but there was no sound. The people's voices could be heard, however, voices of the villagers who had all kinds of worries and troubles. They were holding out their hands and offering their shoes and clothes to be mended, whispering to Valfrid that he ought to help.

"We take joy in our work and accept with patience whatever trials it brings."

Valfrid's head jerked erect at precisely six o'clock. The weather outside was clear, he knew, because the light leaking through the window curtains had grown even brighter and the heat was downright oppressive. Sweat was beading on Valfrid's skin, but he drank a cup of tea, chewed a piece of bread and attacked the apparatus.

"A person's value is in the skill of his handiwork. We can all practice the skill of our hands from an early age on. Today we shall learn how the youngest in the family pass their days and go for a school tour with school superintendent Arvid Academic. Mr. Academic, what does your work consist of?

– I have to be acquainted with the daily work of teaching and education; that is, I monitor the daily life of the children and what kind of things they are taught. These little ones are absolute jewels, so eager to learn and try everything new..."

Valfrid had bought a large consignment of jewel—bearings from jewelsmith Aulis Dexterous. The production of bearing stones was its own specialty, and Valfrid hadn't had the time to master it. Aulis had cut up the artificial corundum pears of aluminium oxide with a multi—edged diamond saw. Then the bearing holes had been bored with a high—speed copper pivot and diamond powder, and the gem—cubes had been set on a metal wire and ground smooth and round. Ball—bearings produced by Aulis were round and perfect.

"This workshop is reserved for the professional class. This is where the select ones work, those who have discerning eyes and trained hands. The noise is quite something. Here, next to me, little Siri is engraving the delicate ornaments of a musical instrument. At eleven years, she is already the young talent of the region and has won several prizes in the Youth Society. There are many who wish to name her. At least the guilds of the Embroiderers and the Specialty Carpenters are interested in Siri's training."

The machine needed hundreds of stones to make the ball-bearings function properly. He pressed the ruby—red gems fast to the gem-sets and screwed them into the dents in the brass clockwork body of the device. Valfrid hummed softly; it was a pleasure when the last pieces started to click into their places within the whole.

"During the next five minutes we'll have the Workers' Band The Shovelmen performing..."

The metal rock tunes filled the room. It was a gloomy and appealing song about a vagabond who

returned after a long journey and found his home burnt to cinders. But thanks to the energy and voluntary work of the villagers, the house rose up to new prosperity. Valfrid's head nodded to the rhythm; the tune had been quite popular fifty years ago. He'd danced to it at the village harvest festival. What a pity that those dances were so rare these days.

The broadcast was interrupted in the middle of the song. The sudden silence in the room hurt Valfrid's ears, for he was used to the pulse of speech and music as the background to his work. Maybe the forecast thunderstorm was on its way, it felt so oppressive. Even the room had become darker. Perhaps there was a temporary disruption in the transmission, some tree fallen on the lines and the technicians busy repairing the cables.

Valfrid noticed that he was hungry, so he clambered to the cupboard and dug up the bread behind the tins. It shone bluish, mouldy all over. The pretzels and the pickles were just as far gone. On the back shelf he found a tin of canned meat, worked it open with a pocket knife and spooned it up.

The parts of the requested module glimmered in the corner, waiting for the Master to work on them. However, Valfrid took up his machine again. There was a lot left to do before the evening, and anyway, it was not wise to hurry with work ordered by the government. They were used to a certain pace of work. If he finished the order too early, they would expect the next one as quickly, too, and soon he would have time for nothing but dilatation modules and antigrav gyroscopes. Nowadays they didn't remember how fast and skilful he really was, and better leave it that way.

The balance spiral of the synchronization mechanism with its anchor was meshed with cycloid gear wheels together with the power transfer and the synchron—rods of the central unit. His hands were steady as pliers, and his eyes focused on the tiniest parts. Now and then he glanced at the radio that was gaping mute. The silence was oppressive; the tick—tock of the wall clock felt multiplied compared to earlier. Perhaps Valfrid was a little too used to the solid atmosphere of his workroom, the sanctity and imperviousness that nothing was allowed to breach.

Valfrid polished the needle and stirrup of automaton steel in the read-write head of the memory drum with a stasis file, until it was completely smooth to the last atom. After the application of light pressure, the surfaces were permanently cold-welded together.

The radio channel came alive with a squeak. There was a whirring, then breaks and white noise, and in the background vague sounds of whispering, as if somebody hesitated to speak aloud. Finally the broadcast settled and the sound stabilized. But instead of the afternoon entertainment programme, a breathless young man was wheezing on the lines.

"Attention everyone ... We... we have captured the national radio channel. This is the first free broadcast... I repeat, this is the first free broadcast."

For a while, the young man's voice trailed off and subdued talking could be heard from the background, but Valfrid could not make out the words.

Then the young man continued.

"Oh dear dark head, bowed low in death's black sorrow / let not thy heart be trammelled in despair.

Lift, lift your eyes on to the radiant morrow / and wait the light that surely shall break there."

Valfrid passed his hand over his sweaty temple and took a gulp of water from the ladle. The requested field module among the waiting orders would never be finished, and the machine he was now making would be the last in its series.

"They called me Evart Quarrel— maker, but now I am Evart Magnusson. I am here to expose the atrocities of the government. This radio channel, like all the other media maintained by our government, has served as a tool of tyranny. You need no longer fear the radio, but beware of people loyal to the State. Those murderers still have most of the power in our society, and they are prepared to commit genocide to secure their position..."

The wall clock with ornamental carvings was made by Aaron Skilful. Valfrid had learned much of his own professional skills from Aaron before the man was taken. It was now five or ten years since that day, or was it closer to thirty? Valfrid couldn't tell any more, time was so relative, the days had become a smooth, continuous ribbon. Aaron had been blessed with a dexterity and understanding similar to Valfrid's. They had always understood each other! Aaron had taken with him his secrets and the names of his contacts; he had not been broken by the interrogations, since no one had come to Valfrid's door to ask questions.

And even if they had suspected Valfrid, perhaps he was considered too competent and necessary to do anything about it.

"We have at last managed to capture this station for ourselves... and other government-owned establishments have also been attacked. We have witnessed atrocities, those of us who have survived the prison camps. We have exposed mass graves... we saw how the lives of over two hundred citizens were crushed in a demonstration, how their heads exploded when the Security Police..."

Valfrid flinched. Could he have scaled the power transmission of the feedback gear train better? Now it was too late to reopen the structure and check. He stopped and closed his eyes. Mathematical formulas danced in his mind: all the calculations were correct.

"The government of our country is guilty of atrocities. People who have been judged useless have been sent to the mines, into pitiable circumstances; many have died of hunger and disease because they have been considered worthless. Mass graves of tens of thousands of people, secret executions without trial... Join us, shake off the apathy to which you have yielded. We know that you think like us, that you all share this same hope, but also the fear, the fear of death that has made us obey the ruling powers. We have to fight back with all available means. Accusations and arbitrary executions have to end. The exploitation of the people has to end. We do not want to be divided into those who work and those who are deemed capable of only trivial chores."

Valfrid swept unnecessary tools off the workbench onto the floor and leaned on his elbows. The machine's mechanic logic circuit consisted of a drum with its tiny rows of rods, which programmed the algorithm for the functioning of the whole machine. Whenever the drum rotated to the next row of rods, the shafts in the reader transmitted the information to the central unit, which functioned according to the command. Valfrid swung the drum to the start position.

"Now is the time to abandon pointless work, to return to the time when people were valued for their human dignity, not for their work effort. We no longer need the government Synchronizer! Our children deserve a life without forced labour! The transmissions of this radio have commanded the control crystals we all bear inside our heads. Those crystals are still active, and therefore we ask you to continue to shield yourselves from all officially prohibited electric devices. The crystal can interpret strong electric sources close to it as an attempt to remove the crystal, and you know what happens then."

Valfrid brushed the top of his head, but his hand quickly returned to the work. The apparatus would soon be finished. Once more he pictured the machine's functioning in his mind, counted each spring, cog, connection and transmission. Then a drop of Möbius oil into the bearings and petroleum jelly into the winding assembly.

"There are rumours that aluminium foil around the head can somehow block the pulse. That is a rumour, I repeat, that is only a rumour, it doesn't protect you in any way – a moment, there are Special Troops outside in the yard –"

Valfrid admired his handiwork. The apparatus was carefully made, each detail thoroughly considered. To look at, it was just an angular metal object, a little like a clockwork box, but underneath the ornamental engravings there were countless interrelated cogs, overlapping transmission rods and microscopically sized mechanics. The whole complex construction had been assembled merely on the basis of a design in his head. The device had never been tested, for he trusted the calculations he'd developed.

Now a woman continued on the radio. She spoke more slowly, stressing each word carefully as if she'd just learned to talk. "Citizen Evart has perished... he misjudged the power of the carrier ray. We acknowledge his sacrifice and continue in the direction he showed us. I was called Ada Useless, but now I am Ada Lisedaughter. Be careful, friends. Stay inside, do not go out, so that nobody on the government side can use the control pulse on you, it is set to kill. Only together can we be strong."

The device would have to be tested.

The contraption had straps to fix it securely on his head. The straps were adjustable so that the middle of the device stayed on the hollow underneath the base of his skull. With his other hand, Valfrid wound the clockwork spring and pressed the switch down. After this was done, the machine would function automatically in accordance with its programming.

Valfrid knew every single phase and saw in his mind how the machine functioned.

First, the mechanic processor performed a self– check. The machine was ticking on its own and moving its transmission shafts, setting flags on to the memory rods and rotating gears until all the check- flags of all the different parts had come up and been approved.

The machine's tools were five filament tendrils. Each tip had a microscopic rotating drill point inside which there was a bit of monomolecular monofilament that was extremely durable and could cut anything. Getting the monofilament had been the hardest task, but luckily Valfrid knew Nestor in Special Materials, who had understood the importance of the matter and agreed to help.

The tendrils bored their way into the base of Valfrid's skull. He felt only a little nip, like a prick of a needle. It wasn't an unpleasant touch, rather like having your skin tickled by a feather. The tendrils started to seek their way towards the upper spinal cord: the machine's detection part had been programmed to search for an alien element within the brain. A mechanic hammer touched a tensed ultrasound string and made it vibrate. Around the echo chamber there were microscopic stethoscopes inferring from the echoes when the tendrils approached a foreign target.

The tendrils followed the instruction of the echoes and each turned towards their precise coordinates. They continually transmitted their precise location and the length of the filament to the mechanic processor within the core of the machine; it moved the microscopic shafts faster than any eye could see, and carefully marked the tendril readings into the memory rods with tiny bronze flags. When the messages from all the tendrils had been accepted, the central unit let the programme drum rotate and read the last command in the main programme. A small hammer struck a piezo crystal, and an electric potential was created in the tendril tips. The monofilaments on the tips were released, and they bored without resistance through the shell of the control crystal and cut off each lead in precisely the correct order, before the target had time to react or even consider any countermeasures.

A metallic clink sounded from the machine as the programme drum rotated back to its starting position and the return-gears of the tendrils connected back to the power transmission, reeled the filaments back to their pivots and the monofilaments within the cover of the tips. The spring used the last of its energy to heat up the resistors in the reel, so that the tendrils would be sterile for the next user.

Valfrid took off the straps and lifted the machine onto

the workbench. On top of the box there was a little quartz window with skilfully engraved windowpanes. A white note had turned up under the glass; in tiny engraved letters it said "Freedom has come".

He rewound the spring and lifted the apparatus carefully into its copper casket, then closed the lid and the bolt.

"The struggle has only started, we have a long way ahead of us. For too many years our work efforts have been exploited unscrupulously. For too many years we have toiled for the leaders of our government, done the dirty work so that they've been able to enjoy the fruits the people have grown with their sweat and blood. We have to declare the truth to everybody. We have to make it clear to the inhabitants of the Floater Cities how the ordinary people have been exploited, the ones who have actually done everything that it's been their privilege to enjoy. But first we have to get rid of the shackles of tyranny. We have the means to help everyone."

Valfrid moved the workbench and the frayed rug covering the floor. A trapdoor was revealed; he opened it with a tug. The fusty air and darkness surged against his face. The steps creaked under the weight of his feet. He knew the way without looking, had measured each step, knew the dimensions of the space to the millimetre. Here he had sat, a small boy, when they came to take Father away. Mother had shut him there, among the potatoes, and sworn him to absolute silence. The trapdoor had been closed, the heavy workbench drawn back to cover it. If they had taken Mother, too, Valfrid would never have gotten out on his own. When Mother had held him again in her arms, she had said through her tears: - Valfrid, the government has chosen you to be educated. But never forget this day, nor your father's work, all that he sacrificed for us.

And Valfrid had remembered his father's fate through all the long years, when he'd been planning and constructing whatever had been requested of him without protests or questions. Because of his special abilities, Valfrid had been let off easily, he'd never been forcibly drafted, never been forced to monitor his family or inform on his neighbours. But it had been equally hard just to watch from the sidelines how time flew past and he was left to drift behind. He remembered the spirited Hulda, the laughter and

noise of little children that had filled every corner of the cottage for a while. Valfrid had been left alone, the others had passed from the land of the living ages ago. He had nothing left but the promise to his mother, and at the bottom of a drawer a wedding photo of two figures faded almost to non— existence.

His eyes got used to the darkness, the light streaming from above gleamed off the objects waiting at the far end of the cellar. Four thousand three hundred fifty— one caskets. In his hand he held the fifty— second. He had also carefully prepared the caskets in which the devices were packed. Each one was hand— beaten from copper, with a complex ornamental figure etched on the side. Those were just decorations, but it had been a captivating challenge to make them, and Valfrid was incapable of doing a careless job.

Those devices were the Master's last will and testament, each one with small differences that made it unique. Like a good clock, they would endure from one generation to the next with a little maintenance until they would no longer be needed. Valfrid's father had drafted the first plans of the device; many other members of the network had offered valuable knowledge and provided parts and materials that Valfrid had not been able to make himself or to confiscate from the raw materials of his job orders.

He set his last device among the others, turned his back and dragged himself back up the stairs. He sat down by the workbench and continued to drink his already cooling tea.

He lifted the cup to his lips and waited.

And waited.

It came faster than he had thought.

His ears became blocked with a bang. His hand started shaking and tea spilt over the tools. He set the cup quickly on the bench. He spread his right hand and looked at the now shaking fingers, then tried to visualize the work he had performed. The skilfully planned mechanisms, whose parts had danced together so enchantingly and logically, now felt like an incomprehensible mess. Even his eyes didn't obey him: he could no longer distinguish the separate wing beats of the fly fluttering about on the wall, nor count the warps in the curtain cloth.

"We all have to make sacrifices before we are free. We

are the revolution."

Not a sound escaped from Valfrid, but he was crying.

The skill no longer existed such as he had learnt to know it. A total of one hundred and sixty years he had been a Master and irreplaceable in his work, making machines with a professional skill and love – the crystal had not allowed him to let any half– done or defective work leave his hands.

Now he was old and unfit for anything useful. If only the result were worth it.

He staggered to the back wall. He pulled the receiver out, struggled to remember the numbers of the direct line and turned them on the number plate. The line rang a long while, until finally somebody picked up the telephone but didn't say a word.

Valfrid breathed one sentence into the microphone:

- They are ready now.

Then he went back to his place to wait for the people who would come to collect the caskets. Hopefully he would have time to see their coming before the fatigue took its toll. He lifted his eyes to the window, then stood up and softly opened the curtains.

Anne Leinonen 2015 translation by Liisa Rantalaiho, edited by Sarianna Silvonen

Anne Leinonen is a journalist, editor and author, and active in the Finnish SF/Fantasy community. Her short fiction has won multiple awards, and she moves effortlessly within and between the genres of science fiction, fantasy and horror. Her works are noted for the recurring themes of otherness and crossing the borders of different worlds. *The Otherling and other Stories* (Kuoriaiskirjat 2015) features several award-winning stories in English.



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