The Anguished and the Enchanted

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Finally, the boy descended to Earth. He fell straight through the atmosphere and landed in the desert.

The Earth is extraordinarily large and holds hundreds of kings, thousands of geographers, millions of businessmen, tens of millions of drunkards, and hundreds of millions of vain men. In sum: billions of adults.

In truth, however, people occupy very little space on Earth. They imagine they’re all over, but, in fact, you could crowd them together onto an island and leave the rest of the planet to the trees and the animals.

When the boy first landed, he saw a golden snake in the desert sand.

“Where am I?” asked the boy.

“On Earth, in Africa,” replied the snake.

“Are there no people on Earth?” asked the boy.

“This is the desert,” said the snake. “There are no people in the desert. The Earth is big.”
The boy sat down on a rock and looked up at the sky: “I wonder,” he said, “if the stars are bright so that everyone can find his own. Look at my planet. It is directly above us...but so far away!”

“It’s beautiful,” said the snake. “What are you doing here?”

The boy replied: “I had some trouble with a flower.”

And they both fell silent.

After a while, the boy asked again, “Where are all the people? It’s lonely in the desert.”

The snake answered, “It is also lonely in company.”

The boy thought about this for a long time, finally to say: “You are a funny creature, thin as a finger.”

“But I am more powerful [vahva] than the finger of a king,” replied the snake.

“You aren’t powerful at all,” said the prince crudely [karkeasti], with a laugh. “You can’t even walk.”

But the snake replied: “Nevertheless, I can take you farther than the greatest ship.”

The snake entwined himself around the boy’s ankle, like a golden bracelet, and said: “Anyone I touch I can return to the ground [palaan maahan / je rends à la terre] from which he came. But you come from a star.”

The boy said nothing.
“I pity you,” continued the snake, “you’ve been abandoned here on Earth, which is cruel and unforgiving. I can help you, if you want, if your homesickness becomes too much for you. I can…."

“Yes, yes — I understand,” interrupted the boy.

And they both fell silent.

§

The boy crossed the desert and saw only one flower. It had three petals. It was nothing at all.

“Hello,” he said. “Where are all the people?”

“People?” replied the flower. “There are only four or five of them in the world. I saw them many years ago but you can’t find them. They have no roots and travel with the wind.”

“Goodbye,” said the boy.

“Goodbye,” said the flower.

§

Next, the boy climbed a mountain, much larger than the tiny mountains he had known. He thought that, from the top of the mountain, he might see the whole Earth, along with all its people, but he saw nothing and no one.

He called out into the emptiness: “Hello!”

And his voice echoed, repeating: “Hello – lo – lo.”

“Who are you?”

And his echo repeated: “Who are you – you – you?”
“I hope you will be my friend, as I am all alone,” the boy said.

“All alone – lone – lone,” repeated the echo.

“What a funny planet,” the boy thought. “Everything is dry, and sharp, and salty.”

Plus, because he mistook the echo for people, he thought the people of Earth were boring and stupid, and he missed his flower, who often struck up conversations with him.

§

After walking for a long time, the boy finally reached the edge of the desert and came upon a road. He was very hopeful, since roads usually lead to people.

He followed the road and soon found himself standing in a garden of roses.

“Hello,” he said.

“Hello,” said the roses.

The boy looked at them carefully. They looked exactly like his flower.

“How are you?” asked the boy, utterly stupefied [ulkona kuin lumiukko / stupéfait].

“We are roses.”

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1 Here, Matinpoika makes use of a Finnish idiom to describe being dumbstruck because of one’s own ignorance and not because of any truly surprising aspects of that which has rendered one ‘out like a snowman.’
And the boy felt as if he were drowning in anguish [tuska huk-kua / très malheureux]. His flower had told him it was the only one of its kind the universe. But here were five thousand others just like it. In a single garden!

“My flower would be overwrought [hyvin huolestunut / bien vexée] at the sight of these roses,” the boy thought. “It would cough exaggeratedly and pretend to be sick just to avoid being humiliated. And I would have to play along and nurse it to health or else, in order to include me in its shame and humiliation, it would let itself die for real.”

He continued: “I thought I was rich, that I had a flower that was unique and special, but I had nothing but an ordinary rose. One rose and three tiny volcanoes, one of which is dormant, add up to nothing. With so little, I have no hope of ever being important [tärkeä].”

And the boy fell to the ground and wept.