The Final Descent

It had now been eight days since the pilot’s plane crashed in the desert, and he listened to the boy’s story of the merchant in a state of madness [hulluuden tila], sucking the last dregs of water from his canteen.¹

He said to the boy: “These memories are delightful, but I have not yet been able to fix my engine and I’ve run out of water, so I, too, would like to walk very slowly toward a fountain.”

“The fox —” the boy began to say.

But the pilot promptly interrupted him and said: “Your fox does not matter! I’m dying of thirst!”

The boy replied: “It is good to have a friend, even if you are about to die. As for me, I’m glad to have a fox as a friend.”

The boy did not understand the danger. He was never hungry or thirsty. A little sunlight seemed to be all he needed.

¹ Unlike the earlier use of järjetön, here Matinpoika uses a term derived from the adjective hullua, which holds a much stronger connotation than inanity, ‘foolishness,’ or ‘absurdity.’ The phrase, hulluuden tila, means to be in a genuine state of insanity.
Eventually the boy said: “I’m thirsty, too. Let’s go find a well.”

Although it was mad [järjetön] to wander through the desert, hoping to happen upon a well by chance, the pilot and the boy started walking.

After several hours of walking in silence, night fell, and the stars began to shine. The pilot saw them as if he were dreaming, perhaps because he was delirious from thirst. The boy’s words danced before his mind.

“So you are thirsty, too?” he asked.

But the boy did not answer. He said simply: “Water can also be good for the heart.”

The pilot didn’t understand but kept quiet. He knew that any effort to question the boy would be fruitless.

The boy was tired, so he and the pilot sat down, and after a lengthy silence, the boy said: “The stars are beautiful because of an invisible flower.”

The pilot replied, “Sure,” and stared at the sand in the moonlight.

“The desert is beautiful, too,” added the boy.

It was true: The pilot had always liked the desert. If you sit on a sand dune, you see nothing, you hear nothing, and yet something shines through the silence [jotain säteilee hiljaa / quelque chose rayonne en silence].

“What makes the desert beautiful,” said the boy, “is that somewhere it hides a well.”
At that moment, the pilot was surprised by himself. He suddenly understood the mysterious [lumoava] shining of the sand. When he was a boy, he lived in an old house, underneath which, according to legend, there was buried treasure. Of course, no one knew for certain. No one so much as looked for it. But it was enough to enchant the entire house.

“Yes,” the pilot said, “whether it’s a house, the stars, or a desert, what gives a thing its beauty is invisible.”

The boy was glad, he said, that the pilot agreed with the fox.

Once the boy fell asleep, the pilot picked him up and continued to walk through the desert. He was touched by a powerful [vahva] emotion at that instant. He felt that he was carrying the most precious [herkkä / fragile] of all treasures, that there might be nothing more precious on Earth. He looked at the boy, in the moonlight, at his pale face, at his closed eyes, at his hair trembling in the wind, and said to himself: “What I see here is only a shell. What’s important is invisible.”

The boy’s half-opened lips looked like a smile, and the pilot said to himself: “What touches me so deeply about this sleeping boy is his flower. It’s the image of a rose that shines in him like the light of a lamp, even as he sleeps.”

With these words, the boy appeared to the pilot to be even more precious than before. “You have to take care of a lamp,” he thought, “as even a slight breeze can put it out.”

Eventually, walking and reflecting as he was, at dawn, the pilot miraculously happened upon a well.

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“People roar around on trains but do not know what they are looking for,” said the boy. “They rush, get upset, and just turn
around and around. It’s not worth it [Se ei ole sen arvoista / Ce n’est pas la peine].”

The well they had found was not a simple Saharan well — a hole in the sand — but a proper well, even though there were no villages nearby.

“It’s strange,” said the boy. “Everything’s ready: the pulley, the bucket, and the rope.”

He laughed, touched the rope, and played with the pulley. The rusty pulley squeaked like an old weather vane after several windless days.

“Do you hear?” asked the boy. “We awakened the well and it’s singing to us.”

The pilot, not wanting the boy to hurt himself pulling up the water, said: “Let me do it. It’s too heavy for you.”

Slowly and with some difficulty, the pilot hoisted the bucket to the edge of the well and set it down carefully. He could still hear the song of the rusty pulley and, in the rippling water, he saw a rippling sun.

“I’m thirsty,” said the boy. “Give me a drink.”

And the pilot knew exactly what the boy had been looking for!2

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2 This statement, Et je compris ce qu’il avait cherché!, and especially its exclamatory punctuation may be taken either as a sign of deliriousness — i.e., labile emotions and loose associations at an otherwise urgent moment — or as a crucial statement about the meaning of the text: that what the boy was looking for, and what the pilot was looking for, was simply someone to hold, nourish, and take care of him. Or, perhaps, as both. (See also the Translator’s Preface.)
He lifted the bucket to the boy’s lips, and the boy drank with eyes closed. This water was as sweet as a confection [makea kuin makeinen / doux comme un fête]. It was made from their long march under the stars, the song of the pulley, and the effort of his arms. It was indeed good for the heart.

When he was a boy, the pilot recalled, the lights of the Christmas tree, the music of the midnight Mass, and the tenderness of his Father’s smile were what made his Christmas present truly shine.

“The people of Earth,” declared the boy, “grow five thousand roses in a garden but never find what they are looking for.”

“They never find it,” repeated the pilot, dreamily.

“Yet what they are looking for could be found in a single rose or in a single drop of water,” said the boy. “Their eyes are blind. They must look with their hearts.”

The pilot drank the water. He breathed easily. The sand, at sunrise, was the color of honey. Yet he wondered: “Why must I feel this anguish?”

“You have to keep your promise, you know,” said the boy, as he sat down next to the pilot.

“What promise?”

“You know: a muzzle for my sheep. I have to take care of my flower!”

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3 This crucial line, Ce n’est pas la peine, is especially important for a psychoanalytic reading of the tale, as discussed in detail in the Translator’s Preface.
The pilot took out his collection of drawings. The boy looked at them and laughed, saying: “Your baobabs…they look like cabbages!”

“Oh?” said the pilot, disappointed, being rather proud of his baobabs.

“And your fox…his ears…they look like corn cobs…they are so long!”

And he laughed at the pilot again.

“Don’t be so mean,” said the pilot. “All I know how to draw are boas’ outsides and insides.”

“Oh, it’s fine,” said the boy. “Children know.”

So the pilot drew a muzzle. But as he gave it to the boy, his heart was breaking.

He said to the boy: “You have plans I don’t know about.”

But the boy did not answer him. He said only: “The day I fell to Earth…tomorrow will be its anniversary.”

Then, after a pause, he said: “I fell right around here,” and he blushed.

Without understanding why, the pilot felt a terrible fear [pelko] and grief [suru]. Nevertheless, he asked the boy a question:

“So, it was not just by chance that, the morning we met, eight days ago, you were walking around like that, all alone, a thousand miles from anyone? You were returning to the place of your crash?”
The boy blushed again. He never answered questions, but when someone blushed, it means ‘yes.’

“Oh!” the pilot exclaimed. “Now I’m scared.”

But the boy replied: “You have to get back to work. You have to get back to your engine. I’ll wait for you here. Come back tomorrow evening.”

But the pilot was not at all reassured. He tried to remember the fox. Weeping is a risk you take if you allow yourself to be tamed.

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When the pilot returned the following evening, he saw the boy sitting on an old stone wall, talking to someone. He couldn’t see who it was, but he listened.

“So you don’t remember? It’s not here,” the boy said.

And someone must have answered him, because he replied: “Yes, yes. It’s the right day, but not the right place.”

The pilot continued to approach the wall but couldn’t see or hear anyone.

The boy answered again: “Of course. You’ll see my tracks in the sand. Just wait for me. I’ll be there tonight.”

The pilot was twenty meters from the wall and still couldn’t see anyone.

After a brief silence, the boy said: “Do you have strong venom? Are you sure I won’t suffer too long?”

And the pilot stopped, heartbroken [sydäntä], even though he still didn’t understand.
“Now go,” said the boy, “I want to come down.”

The pilot glanced toward the bottom of the wall and jumped back with fright. There, facing the boy, was one of those golden snakes that can kill you in thirty seconds flat. While fumbling around in his pocket for his revolver, the pilot ran toward it, but, because of the noise he made, the snake slipped quietly through the sand and tucked himself away within some faraway rocks.

The pilot got to the wall just in time to catch the boy leaping from the wall. He was as pale as snow.

“What's going on?!” asked the pilot. “Now you are talking to snakes?!”

The pilot untied the boy’s scarf. He wet his temples and gave him some water. He didn't dare ask any more questions. The boy had a serious look in his eye and suddenly hugged the pilot, wrapping his arms tightly around his neck. The boy's heart was pounding like the heart of a goose shot by a hunter's rifle. Finally, he said: “I am happy you figured out what was wrong with your engine. Now you can go home.”

“How did you know?” asked the pilot, who was just about to tell the boy that he had managed to fix his plane.

The boy did not answer but added: “I’m going home today, too, although it is much farther, and much more difficult.”

The pilot sensed that something extraordinary was going on with the boy. He was holding him tight like a baby, and yet it seemed that this baby, and perhaps he himself, were falling into an abyss from which there was no escape.

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4 The French term here is oiseau [bird]. “Goose” is, once again, Matinpoika’s addition.
“I have your sheep,” the boy said, smiling meekly. “And I have his box, and his muzzle.”

The pilot stayed with the boy for a long time. When his color returned a little, the pilot said: “Little man [Pikkumies / Petit bonhomme], you’re so scared.”

Of course he was scared! But he laughed sweetly anyway and replied: “I’ll be even more scared tonight.”

Once again, the pilot felt a chill run down his neck, as he sensed that something was hopelessly wrong. He could not tolerate the thought of never again hearing the boy’s laugh. It had become, for him, a fountain in the desert.

“Little man,” the pilot said, “I want to hear you laugh again.”

But the boy said: “Tonight it will be one year. My star will be right above the spot where I fell.”

“Little man,” the pilot said, “please tell me this is all a bad dream: this business about the snake and the meeting-place and the star.”

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5 *Pikkumies* means, literally, ‘little man.’ For the first time, the pilot now calls the boy something other than ‘boy.’ As noted in the Translator’s Preface, the pilot never refers to the boy as a prince, but neither does he, until now, refer to him as a man of any kind, even in the form of a colloquialism such as *petit bonhomme*, which may be translated in a variety of ways (including ‘little one,’ ‘sweet boy,’ and more), but is, most literally, ‘little man.’ It seems important to render into English a term that includes ‘man,’ for it is at this decisive moment that the pilot and the boy consummate their more or less complete identification with each other: They are both, although in different ways, ‘little men.’ Here we also find a strong suggestion that the boy’s suicide is the pilot’s death, or that the boy’s descent into the abyss is the pilot’s descent into madness, or that the boy’s suicide is the pilot’s suicide, or at least the pilot’s suicidal fantasy.
But the boy did not answer. He said: “What’s important can’t be seen.”

“Of course,” the pilot agreed.

“It’s like my flower,” said the boy. “If you love a flower that lives on a star, it is amazing to look at the sky at night, because all the stars have flowers. And it’s like the water. The water you gave me was like music, because of the rusty pulley and the rope. You remember…it was good.”

“Of course.”

“At night you will look at the stars. Where I lived was so small that I can’t show you how to find it, but it’s better that way. My star will be, for you, one of the stars, and, therefore, all the stars. You will love to look at them all. They will all be your friends. Later, I’ll give you a present.”

And he laughed again.

“Oh, little man,” exclaimed the pilot, “I love the sound of your laugh!”

And the boy replied: “That’s precisely my present for you….It’ll be like the water.”

“What do you mean?”

“Stars are different for everyone,” the boy said. “For travelers, stars are guides. For others, they are just little lights. For scholars, they are problems. For my businessman, they were like money in the bank. But all their stars are silent. You will have stars unlike anyone else’s.”

“What do you mean?” asked the pilot, again.
“When you look at the night sky, you can imagine that I am living on one of the stars, and laughing on one of the stars, so it will be like all the stars are laughing. You alone will have stars that know how to laugh!”

The boy laughed again and continued: “When you get over your grief, you’ll be glad. You’ll always be my friend. You’ll want to laugh with me. And sometimes you’ll open your window and your friends will be shocked to see you laughing at the night sky. And you’ll say to them: ‘The stars always make me laugh.’ And they’ll think you’ve gone mad. It’s quite a gift I’ve given you, eh?”

And the boy laughed again.

“It’ll be like I’ve given you, instead of stars, millions of tiny bells that know how to laugh.”

And he laughed once more, before becoming very serious:

“Tonight,” he said, “you must not come.”

But the pilot replied simply: “I won’t leave you.”

The boy replied: “It won’t be pretty. I’m going to look like death. It’s like that. Don’t come and see that, it’s not worth it [Se ei ole sen arvoista / Ce n’est pas la peine].”

The pilot repeated: “I won’t leave you.”

“Listen,” the boy said: “It’s also because of the snake. He could kill you. Snakes are wicked. He could kill you just for fun.”

But, again, the pilot said, plainly: “I won’t leave you.”

At last, the boy recalled something that reassured him: Snakes don’t have enough venom for two lethal bites.
That evening, the boy slipped away without a sound, so that the pilot wouldn’t hear him leave. When the pilot caught up with him, he was walking quickly and decisively. He said only: “Oh, there you are,” and he took the pilot’s hand, but continued to worry. He said: “You’re making a mistake. You’ll suffer. I’m going to look dead even before I am.”

The pilot remained silent.

“You know, where I’m going is too far. I won’t be able to take my body with me. It’s too heavy.”

Still, the pilot remained silent.

“So my body will be like an old, abandoned shell. Old abandoned shells aren’t sad.”

The pilot remained silent.

The boy seemed discouraged but made one final attempt to change the pilot’s mind: “It will be nice for me, too, you know. I look at the stars, too. All of them will have wells with rusty pulleys. All the stars will give me water.”

The pilot remained silent.

“It will be hilarious! You will have five hundred million bells and I will have five hundred million fountains.”

And then the boy fell silent as well, as he began to cry.

“There’s the place,” he said. “Give me a moment alone.”

And the boy had to sit because he was so terrified.
Then he said: “You know...my flower...I am responsible for it. I belong to it. And it is so weak. It is so naive. Its thorns won't protect it.”

The pilot sat down next to him, in part because he, too, could no longer stand.

Eventually, the boy said: “Okay. This is it.”

He hesitated a little at first, but finally stood and took a step. The pilot was frozen with dread.

There was nothing but a flash of golden light around the boy’s ankle. Then, the boy was motionless for a second. He never cried out. He fell as gently as a tree falls. When his body collapsed, it didn’t even make a sound.