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Maritta Lintunen: "Piinaviikko" | From the Collection *Ovisilma* (WSOY, 2006)

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"Holy Week"

My first sight was that of round, bulbous shapes alone. Some golden-brown, some pale, some shiny-egged or coated with crystals of sugar - dozens of little buns scattered before me.

My eyes next made out a baking tray resting against the table leg. Then an eggcup and a rolling pin, both on the floor in front of the oven, and a broken egg as a wet splotch on the floorboards near my left shoulder.

As I took in all that, understanding nothing, I sank back into a deep sleep - and as I came to, after an undefined time, I found the very same sight before me.

I was breathing, slowly. I could feel a draft somewhere.

There was a rustling, singing noise above me. I could make out faint speech amongst the noise.

A vein on my temple was throbbing - a light pulse, then a shooting pain running from the temple to the top of my head and around to the back.

I blinked my eyelids as if exercising them.

The floorboards pressed against my bare stomach. I could feel a glowing heat on my left side, and a cool stream flowing from my right.

Little by little, the fragmented images formed a sequence.

Vaguely, I began to recollect Miliza Korjus singing 'Warum?' at the precise moment I had been sticking my second trayful in the oven. The radio was playing requests. I had a habit of listening to it with one ear, really more for the conversation than the music.

The chattering radio on my worktop was from the sixties; my little teak cased companion.

It was a very suitable kitchen radio, a talk machine to sweep away the silence.

I remember even trying to hum along to the radio, as suddenly my hands fell limp and powerless. The door opened the wrong way; the dish cupboards suddenly flipped to the other wall, and my back slammed into the sharp edge of the kitchen table.

I know it had been a Tuesday evening. My son had called on the previous day, announcing he would make it for Easter after all. He would arrive on the Saturday afternoon train.

Living alone, one waits for another person's visit, to do even the most trivial of things. It was nice to clean, to change the curtains, to plan meals or bake for someone after a long time. My son so rarely has the time to visit me.

The cold made my shoulders shiver. The living room window must have been ajar.

I lay on my stomach and realised that I could move only my right hand.

I could raise my head, turn it from side to side.

My feet - well, they existed, I could see that.

The singing above my head stopped and a radio announcer's voice enveloped the silenced kitchen.

Maundy Thursday's service will be broadcast from Porvoo Cathedral.

Judging by the amount of light, it was evening. A Thursday evening.

Sceptically, I counted the hours time and time again. I felt a tight fist grabbing my heart.

Two whole days had been erased from my memory.

I moved my right hand, and felt it hit something hard. There was a light bump against my shoulder as a brush and shovel fell out of the cleaning cupboard and within my reach.

I grabbed the brush and collected all my remaining strength - the handle only just reached the oven's power switch. I pushed with all my might, the switch clicked, the light went out and the overheated appliance began to make a fast, snapping sound.

At least I wouldn't die from the fire. I might be able to drag food in front of me with the brush, but drink would be out of my reach. I am reasonably healthy for seventy - I could well survive until Saturday evening - but I would lose consciousness at some point.

My body was trembling from the cold. A current of air burst in from the living room. It sounded like a storm outside - the roofing kept banging loudly. The oven had been heating the kitchen, but now the chill from the living room took over the entire house.

The body of our Lord Jesus Christ, which was given to you; the blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, which was shed for you.

The minister stressed the word 'you' each time.

I was never a regular churchgoer, but now I earnestly hoped, that all those teachings were true. That I too would be counted in; that some invisible Force was aware of everything happening on this street, in this small cottage, in this kitchen

which was cooling down rapidly.

People were singing hymns above me and I fell gently into a drowse.

They broadcast nothing but Classical music all night.

Concertos, ballets, Lieder, Arias.

I tired of Beethoven's Symphonies and the pounding of the timpani. I began to wish that the radio, tiring of them too, would develop a 'technical fault' on that channel. I would have been happiest just lying there, listening to the quiet hissing, that lifeless snowfall of the Universe.

I was no longer shivering from the cold though, but from a feverish heat. My thirst only got worse, having eaten half of the bun that rolled closest to me.

The dry crumbs were choking me, and the feeling was unbearable. My shirt had wound up into a bundle under my chest and my stomach was soaked in the stale urine that had leaked beneath me. You got used to the rank stench, but the shivers just wouldn't go away. It attacked you like the Devil each time you were about to fall asleep. Fragmented dreams were woven into strange realities, sucking me below and under. The radio was my only compass; it pulled me to the surface, announcing the hour and snapping me out of the illusion that I was in a summery garden pouring juice for a boy eating a bun. It reminded me that the repetitive screeching from above came from the drainpipe, and not a chirping swallow.

At the break of day, I wriggled my way towards an egg splashed on the floor. I stretched my neck to the brink of dislocation. The tip of my tongue reaching the egg white, I licked like a cat attacking dried jelly. I managed but a few drops.

To kill time I read the only text my eyes had been blessed with; "Lemon Juice & Glycerine, the lemon scented hand cream". I knew the product description by heart in both Finnish and Swedish. That text from the hand cream tube drifted through my

drowsy, feverish thoughts like some mantra - and I repeated it out loud, over and over, to myself.

The sound of my voice was proof that I was still amongst the living.

At some point, I was stopped by the silence of the room and the flood of sunlight through the window.

The music had ceased.

The clock struck twelve and as befits tradition this was followed by the Thought for the Day. Someone read out aphorisms, the content of which eluded me, certainly in this state. They seemed to be in two parts; the first part stated the matter, and the following part immediately refuted it.

What sense does that make, anyhow? Thesis, antithesis?

The absurd sound of music and chatter beat over my head incessantly like a wave. The latest headlines, domestic news, weather reports and traffic warnings - all the buzzing, external world withdrawing to a surreal distance.

Had I once really been a part of all that? And - what was so important about it all, I reflected to myself, shivering in that stale pool of urine.

Had this passing life of mine really been someone else's?

The life of an immature person, oblivious of anything true?

A shadow-life, controlled by instructions appearing through the post, magazines, the radio?

A dreadful chill crept into me and grabbed my bones - I was becoming cold and indifferent.

Perhaps this was ennui preceding death? Could that be why I dreamt of Ilmari, after so long?

I shook my arm, which was turning blue. The coagulated blood had begun to

spread from my elbow towards my wrist.

Ilmari died very suddenly, in the middle of his lunch break though not before finishing his fifth spoonful of cabbage soup. The man departed at such haste, that even his last sentence remained unfinished. I could read the rest of it from his eyes, while waiting for the ambulance to arrive. The speed, at which Ilmari left us, meant that it took a whole week for his son to realise that Daddy wouldn't be coming to tuck him in at night.

Ilmari was lucky. Escaped without much suffering.

They never got tired of harping on about that. I wonder how many consoling depictions of others' misery I had sat through, over those years?

Worm-infested gangrene, glitchy respirators during power cuts, brain deaths, semi-or full paralyses and what seemed like endless case studies in wasting away, became all too familiar to me.

Naturally, once they had finished, they must have expected me to nod my head off in agreement, conceding to them how relieved I actually was about Ilmari's fate - about having to wipe the cabbage soup off his chest and stare at his convulsive mouth and unflinching eyes.

Apparently, though, I had been allocated another kind of role to play.

I was to wither away faster than the bunch of tulips I had recently arranged in a vase.

Tulips reminded me of the cemetery.

There was a fresh strip of grass next to Ilmari that I had reserved for myself. I held back from engraving my name on the tombstone, despite suggestions from a widowed acquaintance suggesting the like.

How offended she was! I suppose I was expected to have crumbled into earth

beside my husband right there and then. She even had the gall to ask me if I had bagged a new man as I was too good to lie beside my old one.

Ilmari hadn't killed my desire, especially my desire to live, I answered.

My son was my reason to live; I wanted to raise him independent.

For years, I sold hand-knits on the side. I knitted mittens, socks, woollen hats, felt slippers and deposited the money on the boy's account to accrue interest - piled up quite a few thousands, in fact. Still, the boy would not take the money when he left to study. Plenty of time still, he hollered, leaving the warm, freshly baked bread on top of the hall coat-rack. Being all grown up now, he was embarrassed to carry around a scented loaf in his rucksack.

I squinted my eyes. I guess they'd dig out the papers, when the time was ripe.

There was a completed will in the drawer of the bedroom linen cupboard. My son would get my savings, the cottage and plot. My niece would get a couple of pieces of sentimental value, and the rose-patterned table cloths that I had sewn for the girl's wedding. That wedding never took place. A week prior to the big day, the girl found out that the groom-to-be had already fathered two of his own - and that he was paying alimony from his meagre bricklayer's salary.

That girl lost her will to live in one fell swoop. Barely twenty years of age, she dropped out of school and remained at home for the rest of her days.

My eyes were starting to black out.

The anxiety weighed down on me like a large boulder, contracting my lungs.

My heart pounded in my ears. I gasped for breath, trying to devour life itself. I was determined to hold on until Saturday, to see the boy once more. To look at him for a moment, peacefully, face to face.

I had to pull myself together, have the strength to keep listening and stay

conscious for as long as possible.

A middle-aged dietician, a young vegan girl and an Orthodox monk from the Valamo monastery were having a serious discussion about Lent, which according to old tradition, is at it's strictest on Great and Holy Friday.

Meditation. Quietude. Fast. Asceticism. Abstention from food, drink and sexual intercourse.

A twitching began in my lower abdomen, rising to my diaphragm. I could barely squeeze out a sound from my throat - just some pathetic hissing, which I noted with some amusement. Urine sprayed out in short, warm spurts along my thigh.

My Holy week was more Orthodox than the most stringent of monasteries.

No meat - not even a little piece of gherkin, not one spoonful of sauerkraut.

Just one measly half a bun, and even that came with a punishment - an intolerable dryness in the throat and oesophagus.

No alcohol - I, who would have gladly handed over my entire pension for that vinegar-soaked sponge that the soldiers raised to Jesus's parched lips. I would have accepted any liquid: bile, vomit, my own urine if it had been within my reach to drink.

And - all that bedroom business. Who in their right mind would want to touch a half-paralysed, reeking body?

No, this Holy Week went by the book, this week was as Orthodox as it gets: every single minute in pure, honest-to-God agony.

The leaking urine dried up as I started to laugh.

I felt like crying out to Jesus and the Devil simultaneously - to curse those fortunate, pontificating voices above my head, whose lives seemed to be brimming with choices.

I felt a lump in my throat, a first sob - and then the floodgates opened.

Warm, saline liquid. a comforting rain from beyond my eyes.

How good those tears tasted - the few I managed to harvest in my mouth, before they vanished on the floor along with the others.

My mother's womb must have been bursting with tears as I floated in her sanctuary; in that warm sea I would now slowly paddle back to - sleeping, shivering, sleeping, shivering.

I heard the vegan girl raising her voice.

People should experience the suffering of a fox trapped in a cage - even for just one moment. The cramped, cold conditions that animal is subjected to, shivering until its unavoidable end.

I sobbed and startled myself by the sound coming from my throat in mid cry. It reminded me of the whimpering of an animal, wriggling in chains.

The monk got carried away by this and exclaimed that the girl was really talking about the essence of Holy Week; how we should all, through our own sufferance, carry others' pain.

I turned over on my other cheek and in doing so, released another frightening whimper, straight from somewhere deep and cavernous in my bowels.

They entered on Sunday evening.

Having proceeded with breaking the lock, they promptly announced that each room was well below ten degrees centigrade.

They found me unconscious and frozen numb. The first time they tried to lift me up had to be abandoned, as the young boy paramedic started to throw up at the sight of my belly skin ripping off and sticking to the floorboards. There it lay like a

pallid, urine-soaked rag of dough.

They were very complimentary about me after the event; how clever I had been in knowing to squeeze the hand cream out of the tube in the cleaning cupboard, and into my mouth.

That sickly emulsion and the minute amount of liquid it contained, had kept me alive.

And - what about the tears? I spluttered, but it fell on deaf ears.

I woke from my long sleep on Monday morning in the ward of the health centre.

Whispering was all I could muster. The nurses asked several times, but failed to understand me. Finally, though, they got it: the hospital radio, and its blast of Easter hymns, was switched off.

They started whispering amongst themselves when I stated, stiff-jawed, that Resurrection these days depended on the luck of the draw.

The dazzling sight of bright green and yellow was enough to tear my pupils to shreds.

Easter grass and wild daffodils.

A bunch of Easter flowers sent by my son had been placed on the nightstand.

He had been detained at work, as often happened.

I extended my arm towards the flower arrangement, closing my eyes.

The stubbled grass felt fragile against my fingertips. It reminded me of a small boy fresh back from the barbershop. The little boy, who always had his hair cut short for the summer holidays.

Maritta Lintunen (b. 1961 in Savonlinna) has published collections of poetry and short prose and a novel. She writes with a keen eye about people who persist and persevere, employing emotional memory to a masterful level. With a precise and economical use of words, she carefully examines the range of human experience from childhood traumas and loneliness to fears and anxieties, both real and imagined. Through her memorable characters, she opens up the small details of life and presents us with living and breathing scenes about what it is to be human.

Maritta has received several nominations for her literary output, including two Runeberg Award nominations. She currently lives in Jyväskylä.