

Cumulus

by Matti Joenpolvi

Translated by Richard
Impola

He was dissatisfied with August, a month from which for some reason he expected the most. The beginning of the month was rainy. Only with the coming of the full moon did the days become high, transparent, and blue.

From a flat railroad yard, train tracks ran into a cut carved through a rocky outcropping. On the horizon at its north end, a high cumulus cloud had developed. The effect was strange; the stem of the cloud seemed to be caught in a rugged grip, as if it had ventured too low and been trapped by the cut.

He gazed at it. It seemed as if he were seeing a black spot on the wrinkled flank of the cloud. The air around him seemed to grow thinner, he felt dizzy, it was hard to breathe. The feeling changed quickly to a faint sensation, the spot on the wrinkled side of the cloud disappeared, it developed a ribbony tail and vanished from sight the way an occasional faulty image disappears from the retina. He felt freer than he had for a long time, he couldn't remember when and where — it was a mere sensation, only a left-over feeling, from a moment, or from his entire lifetime. He thought that from the crest of the cumulus cloud, you might be able to see far into the coming autumn.

Women carrying vegetable baskets and plastic shopping bags came toward him from the open-air market. Many of them went into automobiles parked along the promenade. A dark-haired man was leaving against a door frame of a Greek restaurant. The light over the door was still burning although it was bright midday.

Retirees were hanging out on the fringe of the marketplace near the sausage booths. They were there on every market day. They seemed uncertain about what to do with the remaining days of their lives. At the corner of an abandoned, rotting sales table a miserable-looking bum sat slumped over. One of the retirees handed him a piece of sausage. The bum thanked the man with a glance.

He joined the crowd in the marketplace and tried to see if mounds of peas had appeared on the sales tables yet. Turnips there were, potatoes, carrots, beets, and thin radishes. "Apples! Good apples. Pale, transparent. Taste them!"

The girl had a sensitive face and looked as if she might burst into tears at any moment. The hand offering the apple was narrow and slim-fingered.

As he ate the apple he began a discussion with the girl. He asked about the year's crop. He himself knew its quality and size; the branches of the trees in the orchard at home were bent down with the weight of the fruit. They had to be propped up. There would be problems in using up the crop this year too. He could already see himself at the juicing stand crunching and pressing the apples. It would be September or the start of October. He would carry the plastic bags stuffed full of what was left after the squeezing, and the outdoor air would cool his brow, telling him that another year was over. The stupidest thing he could do at the market was to buy apples from that girl.

As he listened to her, everything seemed to change in a remarkable way. It was a good, expansive, inward feeling. He looked at the northern sky to see the cumulus cloud, but the high buildings around the marketplace concealed it from sight. Not a single thing around him had the same effect as it had had a minute ago. People, vegetables, doves, and seagulls, the sales tables grayed by the weather, even the cobblestones of the marketplace -- it was as if he were seeing them for the first time. As if he had stepped from outer darkness and solitude into an intensive, shared life in a warm, brightly lighted interior to ask: Is this what the world is like? It felt as if the brief internal spent with the girl had lasted for years.

He bought a kilo of apples from her, counting out the coins one by one into the palm of her hand. It was a cool, slightly moist hand, like the side of a fruit early in the morning. Her arm caught his eye. Pale, transparent, he thought.

The marketplace was crowded with people, but they were somehow insubstantial so that one could make his way through them. He did so, the bag of apples in one hand and the apple core in the other. He was afraid somehow. What was happening? He looked around for the coffee shop at the edge of the marketplace, where the market vendors were wont to go.

The hose came from the dimness of an interior courtyard through an archway. The water from it struck the sidewalk and ran in a reddish

stream to be swallowed up by a manhole. A covered man held the spray nozzle. Real estate custodian. The words were printed on the back of his orange coveralls. The tops of his rubber boots, gleaming with newness, reflected the life of the street -- bypassers who, dodging the water, hurried on their way, their minds on the day's important affairs.

Seeing him stop, the man looked again, now in a more friendly way, perhaps because someone was showing an interest in his monotonous work. "The dead man's button. Do you know what that is?" The red smear was washed off the asphalt, and he thought a pail of paint had fallen onto it.

"Juvonen used to be a locomotive engineer," the custodian went on, while he was still thinking about the question. "His last job was driving a rail bus." The flow of water stopped. The pressure put a strain on the hose, but it withstood the strain. The custodian got out a pack of cigarettes from the lower pocket of his coveralls, the hose hanging doubled over his arm.

"They have only the driver in the cab. The dead man's button is a switch down at the driver's feet. You have to keep your foot on it when driving. If something happens to the driver, say an attack of illness, his foot stops pressing and the emergency brake goes on automatically. That's how it's been worked out."

The sun shifted in the sky and drew the shadow of the building closer to its wall. The asphalt revealed alongside it began to steam. The smell was sickening-sweet.

"Once when Juvonen was driving, they saw him rush from the driver's to the passenger compartment and throw himself headlong to the floor. The vehicle stopped in time, the passengers must have been a little bit scared. When Juvonen was looking for his hat and the conductor arrived on the scene, he explained that he had been practicing. As they were approaching an overpass, he thought about what he should do if a logging truck appeared from the side and stopped dead in front of him."

"And it worked."

"That time. A trick like that. He experienced it so vividly that he saw the non-existent truck. But the truck was traveling only in his mind. They say that earlier he'd seen things that others hadn't."

At the edge of the marketplace a man was hoisting netting sacks of root vegetables into a panel truck. The custodian's eyes seemed to be focusing on that action.

"He finished driving that run back to the station, with the conductor close by his side, though. And he didn't see any trucks after that. It was

his last shift on the job. They put an immediate stop to his driving.”

The custodian pressed the trigger of the pistol spray-nozzle and adjusted the force of the spray. Again the water struck the asphalt and again it was dyed and disappeared into the grid of the manhole cover.

“This is Juvonen’s blood,” he said over his shoulder. “He landed there an hour and a half ago from the balcony on the sixth floor. I wonder what he saw there.”

He did not go for coffee, nor were his feelings the same as he wandered down the lanes between the marketplace tables. “Apples! Good apples. Pale, transparent. Taste them!”

The girl looked at him from in back of her mountain of apples with no hint of recognition. It took a minute for him to be sure: she no longer knew him! Near the kiosk, at the corner of the rotting sales table, sat the same wretched bum, as much a reject from life’s happenings as the place where he sat. The group of retirees had thinned out.

He set the bag of apples down beside the man, who lifted his eyes from the doves hopping busily on the cobblestones, but there was no message in them.

Later, gazing down along the railway cut through the rocky outcropping, he saw that the high pillar of clouds had disappeared from the northern sky.