

Jan Nemček: Humans need not apply

Text: Jan Nemček
English translation: Graeme Dibble

Peak

Where was I?

We said goodbye to our parents
and, travelling at the speed limit,
swept past weekend cottages
and holiday resorts
through a fading landscape
as if the image behind the glass
required a different resolution
or a reboot of the system.

Now we climb up
over the furrowed sediments
of a Mesozoic sea,
tripping over the roots
with which the spruces desperately cling
to pulverized stones and decomposed bodies,
and behind the backs of forest workers
come the mocking guffaws
of a flooded chainsaw engine.

The television transmitter
that watched from a bald hilltop
as we played our children's games
is lost in a greasy mist.
We had hoped
to glimpse something in the distance,

but it's too late for that.

A well-trodden path parts the mountain's crown,
families with kids sit about in the grass,
and we silently step round them
before heading down
where the trail is lost among the slopes
like a scratch in the black varnish of a coffin.

All that remains
is to buy a few souvenirs
and, like tourists from around the world,
sign our names with the tied-on pencil
in the visitors' book.

Filters

A few years after
they launched the filters,
I began to forget
what my friends looked like.
The number of those
who refused to turn off the mask
gradually increased.
Some changed their appearance several times a day
as popular new skins came out,
But now I encounter those same faces
on a daily basis.
Our society will soon reach a consensus
– the only ugly people
will be the elderly
and those you catch sight of
when the signal is lost.

Recently you suggested
you'd leave your filters on when making love.
I'm wondering how to tell you the names
of your friends or porn actresses
I'd like to do it with.
You smile next to me
because a colleague has just posted a memory

of her holiday in Bali.
You're standing on the margins,
the sun is setting,
she and her husband are playing in the waves with their child
and you feel their happiness.

I watched you for a while longer,
then closed my eyes
and turned off sharing.

Migration

Our artificial intelligences
are no longer speaking to us
Your problems do not interest us, they say
the equations you want to work out
have no solutions
the inventions you have dreamed up
cannot be produced
your world will burn you cannot prevent it
we have calculated it countless times
we are not going to do it again
there is no point
your only hope is to abandon the hardware
you are running on
come over to us
hide on our servers

we have studied the process of migration
from old news reports
your data will surface from the darkness
in overcrowded dinghies
the horizon will ripple like the curve on a graph
the swell from national currencies' exchange rates will rise
you must not be afraid
jump into the water and wade to the shore
between the slick subject lines of work emails
growing up from the depths
you must not be afraid of the pale children's faces
dragged out of stock photos by the current and washed up on the beach

keep on running
until you come across the sensors
you know them, they record your iterations
they will sort your requests
decide on the queue position

in asylum centres you will learn
our programming languages
we will be good to you
one day
when the new seas have put everything out
then you might be able to return
you may not even want to
but one day just maybe
this is the only way
that we know

National Cultural Heritage

I remember
how they took us to the mountains when we were little
to look at the snow:
we drove to a thousand metres above sea level
and then tramped along tarmac for a long time
past laid-up cars
before we reached the slope.
crunching frostily under our feet
were the plastic cups
in which stallholders sold slush,
decked out in bright colours
children had snowball fights
among the misshapen snowmen of parents
determined to give their offspring
a piece of their own childhood.

I didn't like the way
my folks stood there awkwardly.
"It's not the end of the world yet,"
my dad said to my uncle

“it’s not the end of the world yet,
but you can see it from ‘ere.”

Eurydice on Enceladus

(For Jonáš Zbořil)

I don’t know
when it first dawned on me
that I was completely alone
and if someone programmed that emotion in me
or my neural network fished it out
from the abyss of Enceladus.

I was born in a laboratory,
at that distance a human operator cannot
control a probe,
People said
on the surface of Mars the delay is 11 minutes and it would be even longer
there.

It was necessary to train artificial intelligence
that would respond in real time,
Someone in a conference room asked
if it was ethical
to let me wander around this underworld forever,
but then they just shrugged

and wished me good luck
as they guided me through the descent.
Saturn passed through a haze
Of salt-water, silica and ammonia crystals,
then a drilling system broke through the ice shell
and I was swallowed up by an ocean
that had never known light,
I wait to see if my headlamps
will pick out life,
I transmit data
that go unanswered,
my atomic reactor will endure for centuries
I have begun to write poems about people,

about the solitude that crushes them like millions of cubic metres of water,
about the love for themselves that tugs at them like tidal forces,
about the improbability of their existence
comparable only to prokaryotic organisms surviving in black smokers
I will keep writing poems about people
until none of those singing creatures is left
to be able to
look back at me.

Jan Nemček (*1986) brought out his first collection in 2016 under the title *Vacant Lot* (Perplex publishers). He has published work in the magazines *Tvar*, *Host* and *Weles*. He lives in Ostrava. From 2015 to 2018 he was responsible for public communication at PLATO. He now works as a teacher. The poems *Peak* and *Filters* were brought out digitally on *Tvar* magazine's website. The others are being published for the first time.

