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# Sisu

It is a Finnish national characteristic

but belongs to the English family of s words  
that goes from silence to solitariness to stoicism.

It is the word Finnish soldiers painted on their tanks

during their battle against the Soviets in the Winter War.  
(Did you know the Finns invented the Molotov cocktail,

a shared toast with the enemy

to drunkenness and self-destruction?  
The Finns are nothing if not egalitarian.)

Finnish men lost legs and arms and eyes and souls

among the trees and fire and snow  
and a homeland with a name that resonates like a fairytale:  
*Karelia, Karelia.*

*Sisu* is also the name of a black lolly  
that disappears into flames in your mouth as you suck on it.

And it's what you've got if you drink *Kosken korva*,

a hard kind of vodka that also burns,  
and if you swim in a hole in the ice after your *sauna*.

You can find *sisu* embedded in the sounds of the language:

in the hardness of some of the consonants  
—the word for love *rakkaus*.

But in the softness of the Finnish vowels

—baby *ä* and lover *a*— you can also find its antonym:

*nassuja*.

That's the softness of the weak man,  
of Jesus and of rotten fruit

and of the hopeless drunk

with his childlike hunger and helplessness:  
the *juoppo*.

I saw one once in a dimly-lit restaurant  
seated in a red booth, half-asleep,  
his face smeared with chocolate mousse.

My aunt told me not to look at him.