I was sitting on the edge of a dried-up well near the site of an old monastery, bidding farewell to the waning summer sun. How everything had changed here before my eyes! There had been a monastery. It was no more. I wasn't really upset by this, though as a child I had often clambered up the steps of its porch, painted in bright blue, gripping my mother's hand. They used to pray in the temple, music played, a smell of camphor pervaded all, and icon lamps lighted up the images of gods. There were different gods: ferocious dogshid with bared fangs, the guardians of religion, and pacified, calm, and kindly burkhans. Mother would say, "Pray!" and I prayed. The monastery had disappeared as if swallowed up by the earth. Only a few foundation stones still lay scattered about with thistle and weeds growing between them.

I wasn't sorry about the past, what had perished should, after all, have perished. Even the former monastery well had dried up. My father, I was told, had dug it in his day. Father was also no more, like the monastery, the temple and many other things. But the old was being replaced by the new.

It was wartime. The war had taken all the strong and healthy men of our nomad camp. It had also taken my elder brother. No one knew whether he would return or not — people do get killed in war.

I would also be leaving the next day and, though school is not war, it's hard to tell what lies ahead. I picked up a small rock and dropped it into the well. The clay bottom swallowed it
up greedily. Tonight I'll sit here until dawn and leave with the sun of my native camp.

Evening milking had begun. Bonfires were being started to protect the cattle against swarms of midges. Smoke began spreading slowly over the green August steppe. A larch, with a little spring bubbling near it, was standing not far from the well. A flock of cranes had settled alongside it. They seemed red under the rays of the setting sun. Fledglings were running about, flapping their wings as if trying them out before flight. "Farewell, dear cranes of my camp," I whispered, though I knew of course that the cranes had come from afar and were staying here only for the summer.

The setting sun was also shedding its light on the young growth around the larch. I knew these saplings well, they had grown up together with me. The old larch was bending and withering, but its shoots were growing and storing up strength. As a child I used to come running here to catch the rainbow after the rain, and the saplings had never stood in my way — they were as small as myself.

Swinging their heads contentedly, milked cows were moving toward the pasture along a path beaten hard over the centuries. A huge brown bull was wandering at the western edge of the camp, pawing the ground and bellowing arrogantly, challenging anyone to fight him. Hillocks covered with sagebrush shimmered silvery in the sunlight, like the nap of an expensive fur. Children were noisily sorting out sheep. Waving his red hat, a drunkard was bawling some song near one of the gers. Sure enough, it was Tekhiin Balkhaikh. What a strange name! It would have made sense had they called him Tekh, mountain goat. But why Balkhaikh [fat, pot-bellied (HGS)]? Maybe he was nicknamed so as a child when it became clear that he would never amount to much. Balkhaikh was one of the few men who had stayed home during the war. He wasn't drafted because of a twisted arm. He knocked about the steppe, loafing, drinking, and living a dissolute life.
Frightened by the drunkard's shouts, the red cranes took wing, circled about over the long bonfires and descended again near the spring. The sun had almost set. I would be far from here the next day. Who knows when I would have another chance to see the sun setting over my native camp?

The brown bull continued his pawing, but no beast appeared to take up the challenge. With no outlet for his energy, he started chasing some cows, bellowing loudly and urgently. I burst out laughing; for just a split second, I had imagined Balkhaikh and the bull locking horns. Several milkmaids had gathered at a nearby ger. They were singing, and their voices, caught up by the soft rays of the setting sun, were floating over the evening steppe. Their song was pensive and sad, like a recollection of the men and loved ones who had not returned from the war.

You look up at the sky, and it's clear,
But the next thing you know, it's raining.
You reflect upon life, thinking it's long,
But the years go by ever so fast.

Tears rose to my eyes. I was also coming to realize what it meant to love and to long when leaving.

A nightingale from the Ganges River
Is singing its song near my ger...

Now where might that Ganges River be? Mother said it was in the holy land. Maybe our cranes had also come from there. How big this world of ours really was, this world in which I was born, live and will die. Will I ever have the good fortune to see that river? When Father was still alive, he liked to repeat, 'Man is mortal but he possesses a mind and strength.' My mind and strength will help me to see the Ganges River.

The sun had set while I was listening to the song, and the red cranes had turned an ordinary blue. Farewell, my native land's
sun. The cranes, as if also bidding the sun farewell, soared into the sky and swept over the bluish fires. Farewell, dear cranes! I'll be following you tomorrow!

It was a warm starry night. At Mother's bidding, I had spent the whole day saying my good-byes to the old men at the camp and presenting khadags to them. I knew myself that luck would not attend me unless I had their good wishes. Now I was waiting for one more person, a girl my age and a good friend of mine. I was sitting under the larch, but my heart was painfully reaching out to her. Just a girl my age, but my heart was hammering so hard that it seemed to burst.

Not only I but life all around me seemed to be holding its breath in expectation. A horse neighed somewhere in the steppe, a frog croaked, a dog barked. A little figure flashed suddenly in the light of the stars, and noiselessly approached me.

"I'm late. I had to make tea. Have I kept you waiting?" she asked, and sat down at some distance. We had grown up together, days on end playing, romping and hiding in the burdocks and empty barns. Now we dared not even touch one another, each one listening silently to the other's breathing.

It was very quiet. Only a hobbled horse munching grass could be heard from nearby. The sweet smell of boiled milk wafted across from my girl friend. It had soaked clear through the cotton cloth of her short terleg. I was wearing leather boots and a brand new deel straight from the shop. It was dark, but I kept casting glances every now and then at my new clothes, regretting very much that I couldn't show them off to the girl. I had always dreamed of owning leather boots. They were high ones and had cost a pretty penny.

"Our neighbors gave me a lot of money, and Mother sold some wool and gave me money for the trip, too. I'll buy you some leather for booties," I promised her.

"You can buy almost anything at the aimag shop," she remarked
assuredly.

We had grown up. Even our voices had changed. Mine had become manly, hers was soft and deep. It was dark, but I could make out her sad and tender gray eyes. I was, after all, leaving for school, while she had to remain and keep at her domestic chores. So naturally she was sad. Love and pity filled my heart to overflowing. The poor girl pulled her skirt over her bare legs, pressed her cheek down to her knees, and sat motionless, her eyes full of tears.

That day, the day we were parting, our naive and true friendship unexpectedly turned into quite another feeling. Silvery star dust lighted up the boundless sky. And under its canopy a boy and girl were for the first time coming to know the eternal oneness of sorrow and joy. We sat there, silently swallowing tears.

"I'll enroll at a military school after finishing secondary. I'll become a commander and send for you. Meanwhile we'll be seeing one another during vacation time."

"I'll wait for you. My brother may leave for the aimag with a caravan and I'll ask him to take me along. Will you write to me?"

"Of course."

"And how about your mother? She'll also be waiting for you, won't she?"

"Mother says I'm grown up now. I even have a deep voice like a real man."

The girl sighed and placed something soft in my hand.

"It's my braid. Remember you cut it off so that I should look like a MYRL member?"

Indeed, when I was smaller, I just couldn't help cutting off that braid — it kept sticking up — girls with bobbed hair looked very much like MYRL members.

Many years later that knot of hair, smelling of our childhood, would become my most precious possession. With some mysterious
inner sense the girl had then realized that, but I had hardly taken any notice of the gift.

Life is so much like and, at the same time, so different from a fairy tale. In childhood we believe those tales so profoundly and sincerely, but they disappear forever with our childhood. Sitting silently, we were caressing the sky with our eyes. My whole being was begging it for a fairy tale, and it finally presented me with one. A flock of red cranes appeared on the horizon; the sky was still powdered with silvery star dust, but the cranes were flying pierced by the rays of the rising sun of my native camp. They were flying and calling me to follow them to distant lands.

"Sunny cranes! Look! Sunny cranes!"

Life is not a fairy tale. The braid, smelling of childhood, is the only reminder of my first love. Where did you fly off to, sunny cranes of my native camp? Whither did you carry my childhood's tale, dear birds? Are you still calling me to distant lands?