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Eesti Instituut

Rävala 6, 10143 Tallinn, Estonia
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Pikk 73, 10133 Tallinn, Estonia
www.elk.ee

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Editor: Annika Koppel, annika.koppel@einst.ee
Translator: Adam Cullen · **Language editor:** Robyn Laider
Layout: Nigul Treimann
Editorial Board: Tiit Aleksejev, Adam Cullen, Ilvi Liive, Helena Läks, Ulla Saar, Piret Viires

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War and the Impossibility of the Great Writer

by Maarja Kangro

On May 1st, not a single air-raid siren went off all day in Lviv. My colleague Ostap Slyvynskiy and I were sitting at a sidewalk table at Kryva Lypa or "The Crooked Linden" in English. Ostap was telling me about contemporary Ukrainian literature (I'd asked what would be worth translating into Estonian) and I realized with unsettling clarity that something about the way I write was going to change. And specifically because of the war. Perhaps not drastically, and I certainly don't mean in terms of inflated pathos or topicality. Still, the world that my relatively cynical middle-class protagonists inhabited suddenly felt like a luxury that was over – so much so that even a sarcastic autopsy became inadequate. It was a nice, inspiring world where we lamented climate change and enjoyed a wide selection of ethnic foods and hair stylists; a world where no one even stole computers that often anymore! But that the discords, issues, and anxieties of that world were rendered irrelevant in a situation where basic survival was now the primary concern of so many people. What was the point of a sour joke about the bourgeois bohemian hidden within, when war was going on right here in Europe? When a neighboring country, the historical master of villainy, was attempting to annihilate another neighbor at any cost?

I suppose I'm the type of person who believes it just to fight the aggressor in a military conflict. If not by heading straight to the front line yourself, then at least by assisting those who are with tangible aid. And if you're going to write about war, then better to report than to construct prose. Those were my first thoughts at the onset of Russia's attack. A year earlier, I'd met Slovenian war reporter Boštjan Videmšek during a virtual Dutch literary festival. He's posted reports from Iraq, Somalia, Syria, Libya, and Gaza, and it made me feel jealous. That was my initial, spontaneous reaction. The next was, of course, why the life of a European in peacetime should be any less genuine or carry any less weight than a life in the flames of conflict. Someone must report on the violence and injustice, but someone must also live in "happy times"; otherwise, there's no point to any fight. Even so, jealousy was still my gut reaction.

Over the last few months, Ukrainian writers have had to give profound consideration to the role of literature in wartime. What is the meaning of poetry? What is its function and how should it be written when, at the same time, children are dying in senseless missile attacks?

Ostap recently wrote about many of his colleagues being forced to cope with "survivor's guilt", with the question: do I have a right to speak about my personal experiences when

MAARJA KANGRO · PHOTO BY KRIS MOOR

I've suffered so little compared to others? Why should anyone hear my story when my trauma seems so disproportionately insignificant alongside the thousands of deaths and misery of those who have lost their homes and loved ones? Although calculating hardships is a dubious pursuit, Ostap asserts that Ukrainian writers are increasingly lending their voice to others: to victims of and witnesses to the most heinous incidents. Their writing, even in poetic form, increasingly resembles reporting. I can fully understand the attitude: it is a chance to remain honest while still writing and to not seek the glory of the "Great Writer". You can be a skilled recorder of accounts and finder of metaphors, but don't think that'll make you lofty in intellect! People may remark that's great! when they read your text, but the concept of the "great artist" who encompasses some kind of exceptional moral qualities dissolves in the light of war for any number of reasons.

In Lviv, I also met with the poet Halyna Kruk, whose husband has been on the front line since the second day of the war. She's been unable to write poetry since. A month and a half later, she gave an impassioned speech at the Berlin Poetry Festival where she emphasized that war is not a metaphor. Not one poem can help when you and your children are trying to flee the fighting and a tank rolls over your car. With despairing and very human sarcasm, she noted that the atrocities of war are powerful subject matter: a European author could certainly use them to write a timeless book that will be read for centuries to come. That being said, someone who has experienced such events firsthand cannot author such a work. No one has the strength, Halyna believes, to undergo such barbarity and then explain it to others.

I'm not so sure. Personally, I've found that disassembling a traumatic experience into words can be liberating. Primo Levi wrote novels about Auschwitz (though he's suspected to have committed suicide). In any case, it's clear that others should not take "creative" advantage of Ukrainians' pain and tribulations. I can completely understand Halyna's sarcasm and imagine her anger when I envision a productive writer sitting in their study somewhere in Western Europe, gathering materials, pondering the situation in Ukraine from one angle and another, and then penning yet another hyperbolically literary novel the likes of *The Kindly Ones*, which is subsequently showered with awards, admiration, and medals. Critics will declare: This is the Great Writer of our era! People were wounded and killed when a missile hit a supermarket, but this author managed to present their suffering in a thrilling mode. Who can fault them for it? Who can forbid them from being complimented for the fruits of their meticulous labor? On the contrary: they're a commendable chronicler of the times. But are they "great"?

> *Was sind das für Zeiten, wo*
> *Ein Gespräch über Bäume fast ein Verbrechen ist*
> *Weil es ein Schweigen über so viele Untaten einschließt!* [1]

So wrote Brecht in his 1938 poem "An die Nachgeborenen" (To Those Who Follow in Our Wake). For someone who finds reporting on victims more sincere than poems about trees it's easy to agree with. But the world obviously needs literature, too. It has many purposes, including the power to conjure images to counter an aggressor: concentrating the force of emotions into symbols has been an incredible resource for Ukrainian morale! There's undoubtedly a degree of pathos, especially if it has a "cool" and comical hue. Recall, for example, the little old lady who took down a drone with a jar of cucumbers, the tractor pulling a tank, or Zelensky's witty and biting remarks ("I need ammunition, not a ride.").

All in all, we do need poems about trees, no matter how escapist or "criminal" such texts may seem. I myself haven't been writing them much nowadays, spontaneously gravitating towards Brecht, but I'm prepared to acknowledge their function towards assuaging the difficulties of human life. Although writing poetry about swaying branches or little everyday epiphanies can signify political amorphousness or conformism for some, fatigued souls may find strength and "a sense of eternity" in them that soothes the nervous system. Such writing can give confirmation (even if just to an illusion) that something is progressing along its own path, independent of human affairs. Similarly, it can enable one to feel joy over tiny, moving, mundane events still happening amidst the violence of the greater world. Even the moon is not merely a cosmic body, as Wysława Szymborska remarked in her poem "Children of Our Age".

Still, being able to encapsulate the experiences of a difficult or carefree era with

1 "What times are these, in which / A talk about trees is all but a crime / For it implies we say nothing about so many others!" Translation from the German by Jesse L. Kopp: https://superior-english.com/2017/07/25/bertolt-brechts-an-die-nachgeborenen-a-translation/ (accessed July 27, 2022)

deft imagery or an unusual style doesn't automatically make one a "great artist" in moral terms. They may be pleased to possess the resources – talent, time, or diligence – to develop their creative work. They're fortunate in some respects.

Another aspect that casts doubt over the notion of a Great Writer is human limitation in a historical context. It's hard to extract oneself from a historical framework, and talented authors may turn out to hold worldviews that are depressingly limited and remarkably blinder than those of many of their contemporaries.

Who can claim that the antisemites Céline, Eliade, or Pound are Great Writers? I certainly can't. A few well-meaning readers have compared my writing to Céline's, and I have to say the comments were satisfying because I realized they meant it as a compliment. But I'm equally satisfied by the fact that I genuinely do not enjoy Céline's style, Pound's novel approach, or Eliade's ideas. Maybe I'm politically inflexible. Tibor Fischer once wrote in *The Guardian* that French honesty demands scandals and poor behavior from their writers. Oh, yes – I can understand that as well! I'm all in favor of provocation. Disrespect to the government: yes. Liberalism in everything that concerns traditional morals: of course. But somewhere, there's a line. Racism, insulting entire social groups, and ignorantly violent ideologies make any master of style a hopeless idiot, no matter how talented they are. It's not "cool" provocation.

Can you claim that Nobel laureates are Great Writers? I doubt it. T. S. Eliot was an excellent crafter of imagery, but can anyone claim he was a "Great Poet" despite all his close-minded conservatism and antisemitism? Was Brodsky? Who, although exiled from Soviet Russia, nevertheless allowed imperial fancies to fester in his soul and wrote a chauvinist poem that insulted Ukraine when it became independent.

It's difficult for Ukrainians to accept many Russian writers who were formerly seen as greats: both Pushkin and Nabokov condescendingly scorned the Ukrainian nation, culture, and language. There are instances where it's due to contextual narrowness or insufficient reflection over the issues; where one would like to expect a more sensitive approach from the writer. Yes, we often expect a writer's perspective of the world and the things in it to be broader than that of others, as they deal with thoughts and words every day. But we expect too much.

For a writer is not great by profession a priori. There is no such thing as a Great Writer. If anyone earnestly applied the bizarre word pair before, then, well, the war has now thoroughly devalued the concept. The Great Writer is a fiction, a buzzword, and embellishment for obituaries. But what if a writer should truly happen to be a bravely selfless human and an extremely talented artist at once? Let us then bear in mind that not one person whose acts genuinely warrant the epithet "great" could wish to be labeled that way. And those who dream of being called great were never great to begin with.

MAARJA KANGRO (b. 1973) is an Estonian writer, translator, and librettist.

War Needs No Epithets

An interview with Katja Novak

by Doris Kareva

Katja Novak (Kateryna Botnar) has lived in Estonia for several years. She is completing a master's degree in cultural organization at the University of Tartu, directs educational programs at the Estonian National Library, and assists with literary projects at the Ukrainian Cultural Center in Tallinn. Katja is a poet, translator, and member of the Estonian Writers' Union. Over the last five years, she has translated classic Estonian children's poetry, as well as poems by Doris Kareva, and Piret Raud's *Natuke napakad lood* (Slightly Silly Stories). Her other works include the first-ever Ukrainian-language issue of the children's magazine *Täheke*. Her own original poetry has been translated into Estonian and Icelandic.

I sometimes wonder what it feels like to be a Ukrainian living in Estonia right now. How often have you encountered stereotypes and preconceptions?

Most Estonians think no one would ever want to learn their language because it's so difficult. The constant incredulity has gotten a little annoying because I've come to understand that Estonian isn't just the language of Estonians – it's mine now, too. Of course, I'm grateful for receiving such a warm welcome. As for the war, people generally believe that if you're Ukrainian, then you're adept at anything and know how to answer every question. That you're speedy and exact and talented, and know how to write, edit, and publish; that you've got a whole network of publishers at your disposal and the ability to distribute an entire print run among Ukrainians. It's a common expectation, being a jack of all trades who can do anything and have it finished straight away. Especially when you work in a cultural center. It's weird to use the word "work" because I practically live there. It's not a job that goes from nine till five.

How do you like to classify yourself, and to yourself most of all? You're a cultural ambassador, poet, translator, editor, student, and certainly much more simultaneously.

I'd start with the simplest way I introduce myself to others. It depends on whom I'm speaking to. You don't go telling everybody that you write poetry and translate and what all else. For the most part, I tell people I work at the Estonian National Library. It sounds respectable and doesn't raise any additional questions.

I tell closer acquaintances about the cultural center, the projects we've done, and what I'm working on currently. I talk about my translations with anyone who shows an interest. And only a small circle of friends knows that I write poetry. It can be off-

KATJA NOVAK · PHOTO BY DMITRI KOTJUH

putting; I've seen it. If Anatoly[1] introduces me as Katja Novak, a poet from Ukraine, people recoil at seeing a poet washing dishes in the kitchen. Why not, though?

To myself, I'm first and foremost a translator. Not even a cultural mediator, because I can't mediate all areas of culture and maybe one person shouldn't. As a translator, I'm able to recommend literature that could be translated and, as an editor, I can help to review the writing. That might be my comfort zone: not doing anything I don't know how to do, because I have an extremely strong sense of responsibility. Just yesterday, I joked to a coworker that it's good we're not doctors. If I recommend a book to someone and they don't like it, then so what – they'll come back the next day and borrow another.

I'm not even entirely competent to talk about Ukrainian culture, because it's such a broad field. When a greater interest in Ukrainian literature sparked just recently, I was asked to give a presentation. I discovered that I do know this and that, but everything that's caught my fancy comes from random places and doesn't form a system. I suppose I'm not great at speaking fluidly like an expert.

I found your overview of Ukrainian literature very refreshing and interesting, and it inspired me to learn more. Perhaps the fragmented method and fascinating examples

1 Anatoli Ljutjuk, director of the Ukrainian Cultural Center in Tallinn. – Editor

that you chose was the best possible introduction to Ukrainian literature. But what are your roles at the Ukrainian Cultural Center and the National Library of Estonia? And where do you study?

Everyone at the center shares responsibility for the institution as a whole, and each takes care of their designated area or floor. I've been entrusted with the books and handle the literary processes that go on there. At the National Library, I'm officially a specialist in media competency. However, my focus is on designing programs for primary-school students and youth with the library's Education Center. My master's program in cultural organization is at the University of Tartu. I'm delighted that other students in my course are no longer amazed that I speak Estonian! When the war broke out in Ukraine, they acted in a very natural and compassionate way, and we barely spoke about it. There are people from very diverse backgrounds in the program, of course.

When and how did you find poetry? What did reading and writing poetry mean to you? Was it a journey to a place for which you yearned, or did literature lead you along paths you could never have expected?

I think it all began when I was four years old and rewrote in my childish scribbling the story about the runaway pancake[2] because the original felt dreadfully long. I liked to make my own magazines with crossword puzzles and current events. Those early literary attempts are still stored at my childhood home. I wrote my first poems when I was eight or nine, but the first that I'd be comfortable reading today was when I was 11. My literature teacher at the time accused me of plagiarism. It showed me their true colors.

I've noticed that, to people who don't know me, I generally come off as a romantic young woman with her head in the clouds. One time, Anatoly and I were talking about what kind of a dog would suit me (I unfortunately can't have a pet right now, as I travel so much between Tallinn and Tartu). The others in the room suggested a Labrador or a corgi, but he said no: you, Katja, are an Irish wolfhound. You possess an immense well of ancient might.

How did you discover translating?

I began translating when I was in high school. I went to an English-intensive gymnasium where we had 10 to 11 hours of language lessons per week and read everything we could get our hands on. The teachers were wonderful, too. That's when I tried my hand at it. At university, I had a friend, an artist, who was a big fan of Van Gogh. He lent me the first volume of Vincent's correspondence with his brother Theo, and I fell in love. Unfortunately, my friend moved to Paris and couldn't lend me the second volume, so I read it online. I then got the crazy idea to translate Van Gogh's letters into Ukrainian. Out of the 800 or 900 in the collection, I made a selection of about 200. The texts are so delicate, so sensitive! Van Gogh wasn't insane or an eccentric – the things he thought about were very deep.

2 *The fairytale, which is common in different variations throughout Eastern Europe, is similar to The Gingerbread Man. – AC*

KATJA NOVAK · PHOTO BY DMITRI KOTJUH

Because I studied philosophy for my bachelor's degree, I didn't come into much contact with translation theories or techniques. I figured it out by trial and error instead. My German fell out of use, but I tried to keep up translating to and from English. I then ended up taking an Estonian language course, which was the starting point for my history with the country. It's interesting to translate from a small language that maybe only a handful of people in my native country speak.

What, for you, is the correlation between poetry and translation? Do you perceive poetry as an interpretation of truth, or does translating mean writing poetry anew?

It's a timeless question: do you save form or meaning? I've always strived to preserve meaning and if there's any way to keep the other to some degree as well, then all the better. Form is a game, but meaning is the reason the poem was written.

Translating my own poetry into Estonian was a new experience. I made a draft, one person read it and made corrections, and then another person came and said: no, we're doing this all over. It took a fair amount of effort before the poems were published in *Looming*. Still, whoever has lived in the language longer can immediately tell what is more natural. And when I review the corrections, I can generally tell what I could've done better.

No one will read translated poetry if it doesn't sound as fluid as the original. Let's agree, then, that it's writing anew.

I get the impression that synesthesia comes naturally to you. The simultaneity of smells, colors, and sounds is like a soft, omnipresent shimmer in

your poetry. You don't perform many intentional linguistic acrobatics, but your language itself can be surprising and manifest unexpected possibilities that haven't crossed anyone else's mind yet. Would I be mistaken to deduce that as soon as you notice yourself using a common construction, then you cast it aside as cliché and pick another subtle, perhaps even humorous, nuance instead?

I really enjoyed a two-volume thesaurus I once found in a library in Ukraine. I copied down so much from it. I felt that if I were to ever use a word that exists but has been forgotten or fallen out of use, then I'd be saving it. It always pains me to think of lesser-spoken languages – what's happened to Belarusian is a tragedy. I recently ordered a heap of Belarusian-language books, which I can understand in print.

I've always preferred the Estonian words *armas töökaaslane* over *hea kolleeg* and *tuum* or *iva* over point[3].

The Ukrainian word *ladnyy* has the same stem as the Estonian *ladusalt*. Where did the words come from and why? According to the Estonian Etymological Dictionary, the Estonian word comes from Low German. Ordinary words.

I will say it's very funny to accidentally use Estonian words with Ukrainian suffixes when I'm talking to friends.

People also do that in Estonian and almost obliviously – *tšätitakse* and *hängitakse*[4]. As a translator, what does it feel like to move from one text to another?

I feel physical regret whenever saying farewell to a book. For instance, I borrowed a book of Piret Raud's from a library because the bookstores were sold out, started translating, and then took it with me to Hiiumaa. I translate in bed and the book I'm working on is obviously under the covers with me. I caress it, flip through the pages, study every illustration closely for a long time… It's a very personal, very intimate connection.

How is your first Estonian-language poetry collection coming? What have your experiences with translators been like?

The first big step has been taken – three of my poems were published in *Looming*. There's a story with that. When you and I gave the presentation on Ukrainian literature at a concert in early March, you asked if the poem of mine that was read in Estonian was different than the one in the magazine. The performers told me they preferred the earlier version, and how could I say no to that? I suppose they found a greater affinity. The edited version was published, and the reception has been great.

Poetry does have a somewhat different effect on paper and read aloud, so it's good that the selection went that way. How often do you have to explain something when being translated, and what part of your poetry is most difficult for Estonians to understand?

3 "Dear coworker" vs. "good colleague" and "crux" or "essence" vs. "point". – AC

4 They chat" and "they hang out". – AC

There's generally no geographical dimension in my poetry: the situations could take place anywhere and I suppose there's not much of a temporal dimension, either. There's probably almost nothing that can't be universally understood. I was taught that it's poor form to use real names in poetry. I still tend to believe that's the case. I've gone through a stylistic shift, though – my poems have become sadder. They've taken a significant turn towards current affairs, too; I suppose they're closer to observations without imagery. I feel like there's no point in writing about how special a particular morning is to you, because that morning is meaningful to you alone. Not everyone or anyone can understand. I'm trying to be more and more concise, too. I wrote a poem titled "A Person Stands. A Person Isn't." three years ago when a friend I spoke to one morning died the very same day. Now, it can be applied to the situation in Ukraine. I can't say my most recent poems are straightforward, but they should be easy enough to translate. And they should be translated by someone who knows me a little. That being said, I have no strong conviction that my collection has to be published in Estonian right now. I don't want attention in this role. Not that I won't be pleased it happens, but I don't feel it'd be appropriate at this moment.

I'm even unnerved by the photo that was taken of me for *ELM*. I feel like one shouldn't be beautiful in wartime. Let me give you an example.

I recently wrote about the events in Mariupol and posted it on Facebook. I have 500 or so friends, but only a few people reacted. Then, I reposted it with a picture: there was an immediate response and a flurry of likes. Do I really have to use my face to direct attention to what matters? I also removed my birthday from my Facebook profile. I don't want semi-acquaintances lavishing congratulations on me. How can you congratulate anyone right now?

Maybe it'll all change tomorrow or the day after. Only after we win. Then, I'll gather up all the good things that happened in the meantime and start feeling joyful.

You've often been asked to translate and interpret from various languages. In addition to your native Ukrainian and recently learned Estonian, I imagine you can speak other languages like Russian and English fluently. Do you know any others?

I can passively understand Belarusian and Polish. I prefer to listen to Olga Tokarsczuk's interviews without a translation. But I'm stumped by Võro and Seto. Lately, I've had a lot of trouble translating Kauksi Ülle and Raimond Kolk, as well as Artur Adson. There are no online dictionaries for those languages, either.

My mother and I lived in the Czech Republic for a while. I went to school there and quickly learned the language, but I haven't had any practice since then and can't remember much. My German likewise faded as soon as I went to university. It never really took root, though.

In what ways are Estonian and Ukrainian most dissimilar? What colors, sounds, or intricate emotions are the hardest to convey in translation?

Estonian has the word *kõndija*, which means "walker". Ukrainian doesn't. We say, "one who walks". It's tricky to make a noun out of a verb. In Estonian, you can combine different words this way and that. When I'm writing *Eesti Lastekirjanduse Keskus*, for example – the Estonian Children's Literature Center – then I always have to stop and think about which words are conjoined and which aren't. *Esikkogu* for example, which means "debut collection", is two words in Ukrainian, too. Constantly creating new words is natural to Estonian but rare in Ukrainian. Making "debut collection" a single word would come off as a pointless neologism. Then, there's accentuation: where does it fall? In Estonian it's almost always on the first syllable. In Ukrainian, the second or the third. It took incredible effort for me to translate 22 children's poems. Rhythmically, so much is hard to convey.

Then, you have the question of capitalization. Every word of "Happy New Year" is capitalized in Ukrainian and English, but not in Estonian. Why not? Estonian also has many common words that would sound a little old-fashioned in Ukrainian.

I've heard that Estonians living abroad miss our bogs, forests, and black bread the most. Is there any part of Ukrainian culture that is especially dear to you and which you long for while here?

It's usually hard to find good, quality fruits and vegetables in Estonia, and the farmers' markets are relatively dull. In Ukraine, they swell bigger every year. The official market will be fenced in, but sellers will also be offering cheaper prices out front. And

DORIS KAREVA AND KATJA NOVAK · PHOTO BY DMITRI KOTJUH

the flavors... The tomatoes are so juicy, so exceptional. I discovered in July that the apples in Estonia's markets have no scent. You can only get real apples from friends' gardens. In Lviv, you can buy a bottle of wine and go outside (if there's no space in the cafés), sit on the sidewalk, and listen to the buskers. There are so many easygoing, bohemian places and people there.

You've been assisting with the numerous undertakings at the Ukrainian Cultural Center in Tallinn. From an Estonian perspective, your community appears to operate harmoniously and with an unbelievably powerful spirit. How did you end up meeting Anatoli Lyutyuk, Father Anatoli?

Anatoli isn't ordained: he's a lay monk, an oblate of the Order of Saint Benedict. As he always says: I'm Anatoli and I'm a father, but not Father Anatoli. He brings goodness into the world through his projects and deeds.

I wrote to him before I moved to Estonia, asking where I could study the language. We met when he was in Ukraine and quickly became friends. He and I had known each other for three years before he told me he founded the first Estonian language course in Lviv a decade earlier. I'd been going to classes in the main building of the university and his lessons were just next door, but I had no idea. That story is very special to me.

Sometimes, everything just happens around one person. There are so many different people in Anatoli's life. You can walk with him to the train station and see just how extensive his circle of acquaintances is, from homeless people to men in suits and ties.

I'm a more organized person than he is and need more clarity, for the most part. Our cultural center is governed by beautiful chaos. We all think differently and are walking different paths, but ultimately arrive at the same place.

How have the events in Ukraine affected your poetry? Does a smoldering inner disquiet compel you to seek help from words, to feverishly pursue a magic formula to change the world, or on the contrary – does it have a negative effect?

Some people in Ukraine right now also say that literature cannot help and vow never to write again. It seems a little naïve: never say never.

I attended two literature schools with older, experienced teachers. I was 11 or 12 years old, and the rest of the students were adults or in college. One very strict, mirthless literary critic told us not to write if we could help it, but if we had to, then we'd never overcome the need. The torment of writing isn't so bad for me, though. It's no big deal if I don't write for a while. Sometimes there are more important things in life.

Do you agree with Adorno, who claimed that writing poetry after Auschwitz was barbaric?

I used to think I would die if war ever broke out, but it's strange how you actually process it: once you emerge from the daze, you're still capable of doing everything you need to. Anticipating the war was even more terrifying than the beginning of the war itself. Can you experience anything worse in life? Perhaps only the death of a loved one comes close. People keep insisting that we're unable to express it, to describe it… What I wonder is: should we? Maybe it's a job for historians – recording everything that happened and when it happened in detail. But others don't have to discuss it.

I intended to ask how you find balance and support in harrowing times, but I realized you already answered that earlier. You have a wonderful and supportive family, and your circle of friends is wide and trustworthy. You seem unafraid and steadfast in your activities, focusing on what matters.

There's no need to find adjectives for war. War is a concept that transcends. Like death. War needs no epithets.

DORIS KAREVA (b. 1958) is a poet, translator, and editor.

There's Something Only Literature Can Provide

An interview with Tiit Aleksejev

by Annika A. Koppel

Tiit Aleksejev is an Estonian writer and historian who has served as the head of the Estonian Writers' Union since 2016. This autumn, the EWU will celebrate its centenary. ELM probed into the significance behind the round number.

This year, members of the EWU voted you in for a third term. What is the job all about? How much work and responsibility does it entail?

My tenure can be divided into two parts: before the pandemic now. Covid gave rise to an unprecedented situation. First of all, we had to navigate the inevitable financial difficulties and avoid laying off employees and, secondly, we needed to completely reorganize the literary practices to ensure authors could continue presenting their works, and events wouldn't be entirely canceled. As of today, I can state that the Estonian Writers' Union accomplished both tasks, though it did entail a fair amount of stress for our entire team. At the same time, it was a uniquely exciting period and allowed us to carry out changes that would have otherwise dragged on for much longer.

To focus on the lighter side of things, making a living through literature, no matter how scant that living may be, is a distinct privilege. While crossing the border of a Middle Eastern country a few years ago, I was required to fill out a hefty stack of forms. Two of the blank spaces were "Profession" and "Place of Employment". In the first, I wrote "writer", and in the second, "The Estonian Writers' Union". I realized that's exactly what I've wanted: to be tied as closely to literature as possible.

Why should an author belong to the Estonian Writers' Union? What do they get from membership and what is expected of them in return?

The EWU doesn't expect anything of its authors. Requirements and expectations are dubious categories in general. We don't offer any exceptional advantages or privileges, either. I believe most authors wish to join to attain certain confirmation of their professional abilities. If I am accepted into the Estonian Writers' Union, I am therefore a credible author. It seems to matter to an author's awareness. To me, as the head of the EWU, what matters much more is what our organization can offer its members, and I mean that not in terms of benefits, but of assistance. Such as in defending writers' interests in negotiations over copyright and public lending rights,

TIIT ALEKSEJEV · PHOTO BY KAI-MAI OLBRI

for instance. Then, you also have arguing on behalf of literature in a wider sense.

Whether or not literature can change the world may be questionable, but it is certainly capable of changing an individual. And what, as a society, are we if not a collection of individuals?

One hundred years of the Estonian Writers' Union. Is that a little or a lot?

It's an extraordinary amount of time, especially if you consider the kinds of regimes we've weathered while still keeping our flag relatively unblemished.

How large was the Estonian Writers' Union 100 years ago, and how many writers belong to it now?

There were 33 members when the EWU was founded and today there are 336. In addition to writers, we have translators and literary scholars in our ranks. The gender divide is nearly even. In terms of worldview, the EWU represents a cross-section of contemporary Estonian society. Stendhal speaks of literature's role in holding a mirror up to life, but writers themselves are also a part of that reflection. They are precisely what life is.

There have been points where Estonia's writing community has been split, just like the rest of the nation. What role do writers play in the shifting ideological winds of different regimes?

Writers are just like anyone else: some

remain true to their principles; others give in to temptations. They, and creative persons more broadly, often have a more acute sense of justice, which may result in unjust works. But there has always been a majority of writers who stand up for the right thing. Otherwise, Estonia would no longer have its own state or culture.

The history of Estonia has been challenging, and the occupation era left its mark on the writers. What historical events have been the most trying for Estonian authors over the last century?

Possibly, the loss of our independence in 1940. When writers could see where the path was heading, and that the USSR didn't intend to abide by any of its agreements. The truth must have even dawned on the communist writers.

What are the EWU's duties and objectives today?

First and foremost, comes our mission to promote Estonian-language culture. After that come the trade-union objectives of protecting authors' interests. The latter includes issues like fair remuneration, public lending rights, and general copyright. A sizeable amount of resources is spent promoting literature. We are the only organization in Estonia that holds regular weekly literary events in both Tallinn and Tartu. The EWU provides authors and publishers with the opportunity to present new works and translations that are significant not only in the context of Estonian culture, but from a wider perspective. For example, we just hosted an event celebrating the 150th anniversary of Marcel Proust's birth. One of the most popular literary events of 2022 has been the release of the Estonian translation of Sei Shōnagon's *The Pillow Book* in the auditorium of the EWU. Another critical undertaking is the EWU's novel-writing competition, which aims to discover talented new authors. In short, we strive to amplify fine literature and support new authors to create more.

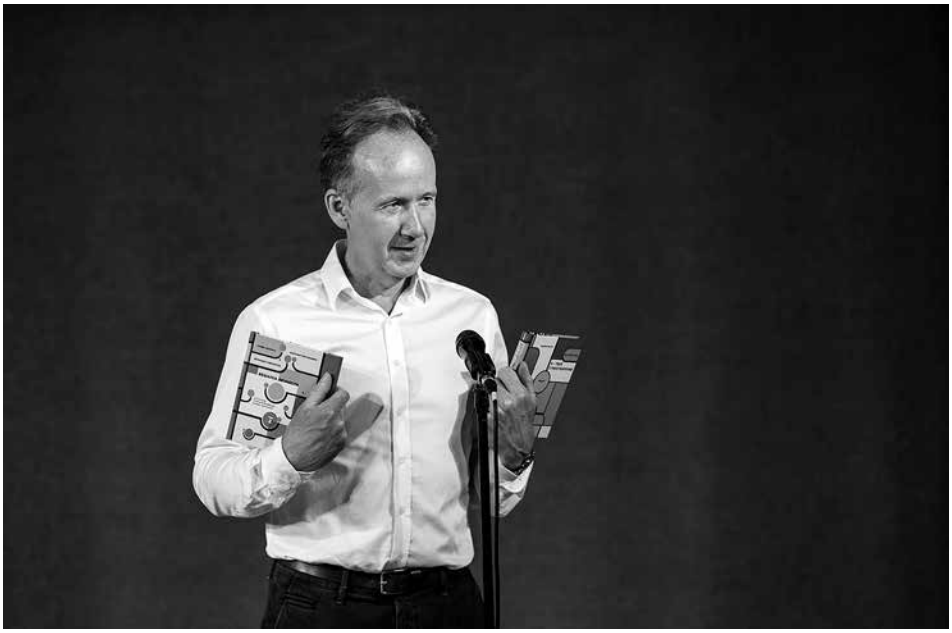
What have been the greatest accomplishments of the EWU, and thereby of Estonian authors, over the last 100 years?

I personally believe that the EWU's greatest accomplishment was preserving Estonian literary culture through several occupations. The efforts and activities of the EWU in Exile are also to be praised for this. Then there is, of course, the restoration of Estonia's independence, in which artists' unions and specific writers played a crucial role. Estonian culture has a remarkably unique tradition of original novel-writing and translation, particularly in the historical genre.

Who is the contemporary writer and what is their function in society?

Anyone who has published something can call themselves a writer these days, but I suppose a true writer is one whose works connect with readers and leaves an imprint on culture. Proceeding from the sense of justice I mentioned earlier, a writer should be socially bound to speak the truth and, if speaking the truth is impossible then, at least to not lie.

What kind of an era is it for literature? Good, fair, poor?



TIIT ALEKSEJEV · PHOTO FROM ARCHIVE

Compared with the time of Beowulf, it's fantastic. Though literature's share in overall culture has clearly decreased since the early 20th century, the trend isn't due to a decline, but to culture diverging and diversifying on the whole. That being said, there's no danger of literature's disappearance. People wish to read and there's something that only literature can provide. Something that can't be shown on a screen or a stage. Literature's magical and psychological dimensions.

Can we be satisfied with the number of active fiction readers in Estonia, given our small population? I suppose changes have occurred in that area as well.

Of course, there have been changes and they're due to the same cultural divergence. A portion of literature is competing with the rest of the enormous entertainment industry. Yet, literature is something much more than entertainment. There are always those seeking something more lasting; something that will touch them on a deeper level. Whereas one could have a casual approach to attracting readers just a couple decades ago, this is no longer the case. We need to increase the number of readers, especially young ones. Not that they've become less intelligent, but so many other options have spawned. That burgeoning is also misleading. As Jaan Kaplinski succinctly put it: "as a whole, everything has increased, but taken individually, there is less".

How international is Estonian literature?

Every national literature is a part of world literature; it exists as a complete organism. You can find top-rate writers of every nationality. It's a question of tending to the

The Estonian Writers' Union is a professional association of writers and literary critics that was founded on October 8, 1922 at Tallinn Town Hall. During the first independence of Estonia the chairmanship of the creative union was held by Friedebert Tuglas, Eduard Hubel (Mait Metsanurk), Karl Ast (Rumor), Henrik Visnapuu, and August Jakobson.

When Estonia was incorporated into the Soviet Union, an organizing committee of the Estonian Soviet Writers' Union began to operate in October 1943. On October 8th and 9th, 1943, a founding conference took place in Moscow, where the board, presidium, and the chairman of the new union were elected. The Moscow-born association of Estonian writers was called Estonian Soviet Writers' Union until 1958, and later became the Writers' Union of the Estonian SSR.

During the 1941 to 1944 German occupation of Estonia the Union's work was, at first, organized by a three-member board. Estonian writers managing to escape to the free west in the war of the autumn of 1944, succeeded in organizing their activities so quickly that the Estonian Writers' Union Abroad was founded as early as 1945 in Stockholm.

Ideological isolation made it impossible to have official contacts between the two writers' unions, the one in Estonia and the

garden. One element is state support for literature's dissemination, and another is for translators' enthusiasm and motivation to be the vehicle for Estonian literature in their respective native languages. We must show our appreciation to these translators and foreign publishers who have faith in Estonian literature.

What can the EWU do, and what is it doing, to ensure that Estonian literature is disseminated and translated, and that writers are known and loved at home and abroad?

The EWU must recognize authors whose works are of substance and support them in every way: both morally and financially. Simultaneously, we must do our part to foster the growth of new writers. Literature is a singular element shared between the living and the dead, but it's also a crucial tie to the modern day; to all the changes going on around us.

The literature of each land should have a specificity, something characteristic. What makes Estonia's literature and authors stand out in the world?

The power of the word in Finno-Ugric tradition. Its relationship to the environment, spells, and protective magic. Its openness to the world.

What do Estonian writers have in common with those of any other country? What are the differences? Is there any difference?

There may be no difference in principle, meaning the desire and need to create, but

one abroad, until 1989. However, in May 1989 an "unofficial", but actually high-level and extremely successful meeting of writers from both sides of the border took place in Helsinki. Honest and talented writers at home and abroad had succeeded in protecting and supporting their nation's ideals of freedom and culture despite all the political and economic difficulties. The professional association of writers in Estonia began to call itself the Estonian Writers' Union again in 1991.

From 1995 until 2004, EWU was chaired by Mati Sirkel, after that it was chaired by Jan Kaus (2004-2007) and Karl Martin Sinijärv (2007-2016). Currently the chairman of EWU is Tiit Aleksejev (since April 2016).

In October 2000, the Estonian Writers' Union Abroad decided to dissolve itself and its former members were accepted as members of Estonian Writers' Union. A section of EWU was founded in Stockholm (chaired by Karin Saarsen-Karlstedt) in addition to the section in Tartu (chaired by Janika Kronberg, Piret Bristol and currently by Berk Vaher).

As of 2022, EWU has a membership of 336 writers, literary translators, critics, and researchers both in Estonia and worldwide.

As of 1992, the Estonian Writers' Union is a member of the European Writers' Council.

there certainly are in terms of environment and history. Those are two strengths at the Estonian writer's disposal.

What are the EWU's current strengths and what are its weaknesses?

Our strengths are independence (though it naturally leads to financial difficulties) and young authors' interest in joining the organization. Our weaknesses are mainly of the monetary persuasion. The EWU is a non-profit organization that receives support from the Cultural Endowment of Estonia for organizing literary events but finances its own operating costs from rental revenue. That revenue has been in decline since the beginning of the pandemic.

What goals has the EWU set for itself? What's next?

Our goals and intentions can be summarized by the keywords: "the significance of literature in culture", "identity", "young authors", "continuity", and "change".

How will the EWU be celebrating its centenary, both in Estonia and abroad?

We'll be marking the occasion with literary events taking place over the entire year, but the main event will be a gala at the Estonia Opera House on October 8th. It's important to note that this isn't merely the anniversary of the founding of a creative union, but a cultural milestone to which the entire Estonian nation has contributed.

ANNIKA KOPPEL (b. 1964) is the editor-in-chief of Estonian Literary Magazine.

A Writer Not Bound by Borders

by Heidi Aadma

In 2007, Martin Algus had a dual victory: his problem play *Janu* (Thirst) and youth play *Ise oled*! (You Are!) received first and second place, respectively, in the Estonian Theater Agency's playwriting competition. The jury commented that both works reflect upon modern society and the author himself doesn't argue, acknowledging that they spring from his past and present alike.

Algus's 2007 plays were his debuts, and a pattern began to form from that thirst and you-are-ism, though its roots extend much deeper. The author, who studied at the Viljandi Culture Academy, started translating contemporary foreign drama into Estonian while working as an actor and searching for theatrical works to perform. It was thanks to his efforts that the drama by Mark Ravenhill, and Oleg and Vladimir Presnyakov first found its way into the Estonian language. He received the Estonian Theater Association's Aleksander Kurtna Prize for Translation in 2004 and has translated nearly thirty plays to date. While Algus enjoyed playing simple characters on stage, he found some roles hard to identify with; saying he only began to comprehend what a play could truly convey once he started translating. As a reflection of this understanding, this piece gives translators of Algus's work an opportunity to comment on his writing. As of today, there are nearly twenty translations of Algus's drama.

> *"The first thing that comes to mind when I think of Martin's style is his intuitive sense of structure, narrative, and drama; how he proceeds from the story. Reading his works, you feel that the point of departure is precisely the story he wishes to tell. Added to that is his incredible professionalism and confident, polished writing."*
> (**Varja Arola**, who translated Algus's play ***Kaheksajalg*** (The Octopus) into Finnish)

Also coming from a place of high societal tension are his plays ***Postmodernsed leibkonnad*** (Postmodern Families, 2009) and ***Väävelmagnooliad*** (Sulfur Magnolias, 2013), both of which were awarded in the Estonian Theater Agency's playwriting contest and staged soon after. The latter of the two received the Estonian Theater Union's Award for Original Drama, with judges commending the way it breathes new life into the classical playwriting style and addresses pressing social issues through finely tuned dialogues.

While Postmodern Families surprised readers and audiences by examining family patterns from an LGBTQ angle – something

still extremely rare in Estonian drama – Sulfur Magnolias brings into focus the problems that surround the care of elderly parents while further complicating the situation with a previously abusive relationship. The rhythms and pauses used elevate the story above commonplace woes and give it an outside poetic gaze. Sulfur Magnolias' continued relevance and transcendence of national borders was reaffirmed by its premiere at the Lithuanian National Drama Theater in Vilnius this year.

> *"Sulfur Magnolias is one of my favorite plays. The first time I read the work, it left a very deep impression and made me consider a constellation of social topics. Over the years, various events have made my thoughts return to it time and again. Perhaps it's the exceptional effect of Martin's compact style – one room and three people, one of whom almost never speaks – that makes his layered drama stay with you for so long."*
> (**Madli Björck**, who translated Algus's plays *Contact* and *Sulfur Magnolias* into Swedish)

Algus's debut novel ***Midagi tõelist*** (Something Real) was published in 2018, and his play of the same name was staged at the Vanemuine Theater later that year. Critics have called the play, which is composed of two men's interweaving monologues and topics that are very acute in our day and age, "masterful" and "razor-sharp". One character's simple porn addiction evolves into a tense thriller that doesn't let up till the very last lines despite the static structure. Algus doesn't neglect the linguistic side of the text amidst all the excitement, weaving his poeticism into the developing crime

MARTIN ALGUS · PHOTO BY KRISTJAN JÄRV

story. Addressing the audience, the two men hand off sentences like relay batons, their repeating words sliding effortlessly into discordant contexts: home, one step back, trap, family, camera, true, surprise, love, everything, empty, waiting…

> *"Martin Algus has the fantastic ability to capture mundane stories and develop them into exciting plays that treat serious issues in a funny and entertaining way. His works are tense and set to precise rhythms. His characters and situations are multi-faceted, and there is no lack of surprise. In my opinion, he is a contemporary playwright par excellence."*
> (**Bence Patat**, who translated Algus's play *Something Real* into Hungarian)

Writing is a means of both thought and meditation for Algus. When starting a new play, he usually tasks himself with discovering a fresh and novel style. Something to surprise even himself. One such outcome was ***Kes Kardab Pimedat?*** (Who's Afraid of the Blind?), which was written in 2019 in cooperation with the Estonian Association of the Blind, Vaba Lava (Open Space), Jaanika Juhanson, and the Terateater – a theater for the blind and visually impaired. The pieces asks questions frequently posed by seeing people such as: Do blind people attend plays? What is it like for a blind person to fall in love? Can a blind person dance? Do blind people dream? Can a blind person take the stage unassisted? Though the play is strictly performed by blind actors, the play has a profound impact on audiences that span the sight spectrum: the necessary layers are created in tandem by lines spoken on stage and visual descriptions.

A long pause between the completion of *Something Real* and its staging became a decisive factor in the direction of Algus's stylistic pursuits. As he remarked in an interview:

"I began adapting the play into a novel and realized I needed to go back to square one, because the terse dramatic lines were too laconic in book form. […] After a while, I knew I couldn't use the usual 'line intended for speech'. So, I adopted a different tone and started storytelling. If you compare the novel to the play, then central events are more or less the same, but the former has four-to-five times more material and additional characters. They're palpably different works. The play is set in Tartu, the book in Tallinn. But the story is universal and could take place almost anywhere in the world."

Something Real received the Cultural Endowment of Estonia's Prize for Prose and the Eduard Vilde Award for Literature.

> *"Something Real genuinely surprised me: it's a narration that doesn't read like a monologue in translation. Algus's style is exemplary; it is precise and 'normal', not feigned. A text like his makes the translation process simple and fluid, and I believe the story is better communicated in turn."*
> (**Anna Juga-Szmańska**, who translated Algus's play *Something Real* into Polish)

Algus's debut collection of ten short stories, ***Tagamaa*** (Hinterland), travels through a century decade by decade. Characters, who are restless, adrift, and long to be elsewhere, are juxtaposed with nature and animals. Whereas three lions ready for conflict are displayed on Estonia's coat of arms, Algus's short story "Ghandi" has one of these escaped Kings of the Jungle pad nonchalantly through an Estonian town in the early 1990s, shortly after the country regained its independence. Without harming a single (human) soul, and perhaps doing just the opposite, the animal eventually returns to its cramped enclosure in a traveling circus. In the meantime, it throws the sleepy community into a frenzied state, unnerving the local police chief the morning after his wife's birthday party, making the recently laid-off economist Valter take a long look in the mirror, sending skeptics onto the streets to demonstrate, and forcing the rest of the population to stay indoors just

like earlier in the pandemic. The catalyst for all these events is a late-night conflict between the circus workers and a gang of inebriated locals.

Literary critic Pille-Riin Larm called "Gandhi" the key to Algus's collection, revealing themes that span his works. She also believes the story could be reclassified as a dramatic script:

"We can see the camera 'zoom in' on a small town in the starry early hours of a September morning, then pan from one character to the next: drunkards passed out in a Nissan Cherry parked behind a knickknacks store, a street cleaner carrying a broom (slung over her shoulder 'like a rifle' in an allusion to later shots that are never fired), Constable Alar Pärnlin roused by his ringing telephone in a run-down apartment building, the economist Valter Saarniit practicing an existentially-charged speech before his bathroom mirror in a house on the edge of town, and so on."

Larm notes that the author doesn't just stimulate one's visual imagination but pays attention to characters' vocal registers as well.

At the same time that Tallinn's Viru Center's Rahva Raamat was named Bookstore of the Year at the London Book Fair, the BBC Audio Drama Award for Best European Drama was given to *The Lion*: an Estonian Public Broadcasting radio drama based on Algus's "Gandhi". As the jury commented, it is "a compelling and thought-provoking story about a community's response to the unknown. With wonderful music and sound design, this drama made us laugh, made us think, and made us want to keep listening." The work, which has a large cast of characters and is Algus's eighteenth drama, also received a Special Commendation at the 2021 Prix Europa Festival.

> *"Martin Algus has the unique ability to coax out a character's most intricate and intimate emotions and then shape them into fluid, coherent (inner) dialogues. His empathy becomes theirs, and that transfers to the reader, listener, or observer in turn."*
> (**Adam Cullen**, who translated Algus's radio drama *The Lion* and plays *Sulfur Magnolias* and *Something Real* into English)

When Algus isn't working on prose or plays, he can often be found writing screenplays for television and film. He has authored close to two dozen since 2008, including an adaptation of Oskar Luts's Estonian literary classic *Soo* (The Swamp), while his comedy series *Lahutus Eesti Moodi* (Divorce, Estonian-Style) won Best TV Show at the 2020 Estonian Film and Television Awards. If you're wondering what else he could possibly do with his time, then the answer is writing poetry: Algus's debut collection ***Paranemine*** (Recovery) was published in 2021. His remarkably personal poems speak about emerging from grief and perceiving the abundance of love in the world.

HEIDI AADMA (b. 1976) is a dramaturge. She organizes the Estonian Theater Agency's biennial playwriting competition, and a new playwriting mentorship program. Aadma runs the Estonian drama database at teater.ee, which contains English-language information about Estonian playwrights, plays, and their foreign translations.

Living Matters More Than Writing

An interview with Peeter Sauter[1]

by Merily Salura

Estonian writer and translator Peeter Sauter's first novel *Indigo* (1990) became an instant classic and an important work in Estonian literary innovation at the time of its release. Throughout the last few decades, Sauter's prose and prose poetry have mostly depicted everyday scenes, emphasizing repetition, and naturalism, and providing a portrait of a generation. Sauter has translated, into Estonian, selected works by Charles Bukowski, Jack Kerouac and Lawrence Ferlinghetti. Currently his novel *Ära jäta mind rahule* (Don't Leave Me Be, 2013) is being translated into English by Adam Cullen with Tanooki Press.

Your first text was published in 1988 in *Vikerkaar*. How did you end up writing at all?

It started with diary-writing, as for many. At a certain point when I had nothing to do, I took some extracts from my diary – which I had switched from trying to be philosophical to trying to describe reality as exactly as I could – compiled something better together and sent it off to the journal *Vikerkaar*. Joel Sang, the editor, published it and gave a very prompt answer: "The story is fine, we'll publish it." That was all. But, later on I found out that Sang had said: this guy has described his own life and will probably never write literature.

That's ironic.

Well, but I understand it. And he had a point. When I've tried to do certain fictional literature, well, it seems artificial and doesn't work all that well. If I make up characters and stories and so on, it doesn't interest me either. Maybe a good way [to do it] is somewhere in between, between describing your very close life and some fantasies, some fictional motives. Maybe. And I feel that most writers take a lot from their private life, characters are prototypes, and so on. And it's the same with me. Nothing new there.

Reading your books, one gets the sense of peeking into your life. Your texts are extremely realistic and close to life, to the point of using the names [of the people around you] and situations that somebody might really believe have happened to you. It gives your work this memoir-like feeling. Is this intentional?

Using real names is common. Let's say, Jack Kerouac first wrote *On the Road* with real

1 This interview was conducted originally in English. – AC

PEETER SAUTER · PHOTO BY DMITRI KOTJUH

names. I believe it was already in 1957. I translated it into Estonian. And the publisher asked him to change the names from real names to fictional. He did. Now they have published the original manuscript with the real names. There is not much point anyway, people who are interested or who are close try to understand who the prototypes are and who is who. Where else can we take material for literature? We start writing basically from reading. We enjoy reading, and then we think 'that is exciting, maybe I'll try to write'. But what to write about? About previous literature? This is an option as well. Combine classic stuff or something. But one well-known attitude is to write about what you know. Otherwise it doesn't matter, it doesn't touch you or anyone else.

It is very natural that we take from our own experiences. Especially writers who come from journalism. Like Hemingway, for example. And there are many who also write journalism. You can use that to try to get close to people and reality, and take down barriers. In other words, it is not proper, it is not nice to speak so directly about what was happening or who is who. Journalism also teaches one to write fast because you need such-and-such many characters by this hour and you just do it. You don't think if it's good or bad, there's no point in that, because it comes and goes. The day after tomorrow nobody remembers it. Maybe this also teaches you to take literature lightly, not too seriously.

How do we know what happens to a literary text – nobody knows! Maybe it goes nowhere. Kafka asked that his novels be burned, but they were not. But if they were burned, well… it's a pity, but it's no big thing

anyway. I've often thought that we could, let's say, throw half of someone's collected works into the bin. The essence, what is their personal attitude or style, is in almost every piece. Some can write better things, poetry, prose, drama, but regardless the core or the main thing remains the same.

If I don't write another word of literature my whole life, what does it matter? Not much. Living is more important than writing. If we make writing more important, then we are not nice to those we are close to because we put the writing first but, well, children, partners, loved ones, maybe they're more important still.

You probably wouldn't shut yourself in a room to write for three months in a row like Victor Hugo, would you?

Maybe I could, I haven't done it, but maybe I could, just for a period, as an exercise. To get something completed. If you want to get something completed then you put other things aside, but in the back of your mind you still know that you will return to… to Estonia, to nature, to… I don't know, rock'n'roll and other things you love, motorbike riding for me and so on.

Right, that makes a lot of sense. I've noticed that many of your stories and texts tend to wander around and be about wandering around, as in having no specific beginning or ending or story arc, so to say. On the one hand it tends to exclude the possibility of giving a big meaning or one specific set meaning to your texts. What pulls you towards this kind of approach, what is attractive to you about it?

I had a word with Tõnu Õnnepalu about the matter and he said that characters, they stink, he hates characters! He doesn't make up any characters or storylines, they are so predictable that you read a little and you can guess where it takes you. It's kind of an imaginative thing that doesn't touch the soul like music, or the things that touch your soul in poetry. How can you put your finger on these? Why does it work? How does it work? Creating a detective story or fantasy novel – why not? But it's more of a technical work.

I see. An example perhaps is one of your later works *Surm Bulgaarias* (Death in Bulgaria) that, as critics have also said, quite clearly contains a story. How was the idea for that story born?

Triinu Tamm, the editor of *Loomingu Raamatukogu*, asked for something. And perhaps I thought that a very loose thing is not proper for *Loomingu Raamatukogu*, which publishes very good pieces. So, if I just cut a piece from some longer left-around text, will they like it? I tried to make more of a story with a beginning and an end. But it doesn't end anywhere anyway, and it almost takes you to nowhere, and the middle part is also kind of nowhere. In Kafka's writing, too, something just happens, followed by something that you don't understand at all, and then it stops and there is really no ending; it could continue. And he didn't end them, the publishers tried to put them together into a novel-like structure.

Is that also the case with *Kana peni* (Chicken Mutt)? I remember reading something about the editor tighten-

ing it. I really enjoyed that book. It feels very immersive. It feels like being right there and hanging out.

Chicken Mutt was not changed much. The previous work, *Sa pead kedagi teenima* (Gotta Serve Somebody[2]), was edited by Jan Kaus who tried to create a structure, made chapters so it wouldn't be such a loose… I don't know… scouse. He put some logic in there. He also proposed the title, which I didn't like at all, but I agreed, because he did so much work with the text and I didn't resist.

Laura's version for the title was *Vanad suitsuheeringad* – or Old Red Herrings in English – which is also nice, it has a double meaning. *Vanad suitsuheeringad* are of course me and Laura. Two old herrings, together, smoking, and being quiet, like herrings. I really liked it.

Yes-yes, it's a great image for capturing that post-divorce type of situation.

You can't split up entirely because you have so many connections and memories, and you can't get together, and so you just sit together and are quiet [laughing]. It is sad but also not bad. It is kind of consoling, or… I don't know… the only thing you want to do.

Your last two novels from 2021, *Chicken Mutt* and *Death in Bulgaria* both deal with relationship drama, as does a large part of your prose poetry, and the protagonist of *Chicken Mutt* believes a fight is necessary in a certain sense, it's time to rest from each other. Do you agree with him?

This is a psychologically interesting matter. Why is there such a thing as sadomasochism? I did an interview with Kaur Kender and he said that, basically, fighting and making love are similar or the same thing because the endorphins you get flowing, adrenaline and the others, are from the same basis. I remember from my first marriage that good sex sometimes happened after severe fighting. When were we fighting and made up – what was there to do then? "What the hell, we are not fighting anymore, we are not quarrelling. Let's go to bed." [laughing] That is kind of a fresh approach, like a new love story.

Right, it certainly emphasizes or creates a new start, doesn't it?

Why after a storm in nature is there occasionally a time of quiet and fresh air? Kind of a new start. Some things are broken. There is sadness, but there is also a new beginning.

You use a lot of repetition in your texts. Is this intentional and why?

I don't know. Maybe it's my character. I also like minimalistic music, which uses a lot of repetition. Like Gavin Bryars, *Jesus' Blood* where it repeats, repeats, one song recorded from a homeless man. When the repetition works it can take you to some kind of… maybe even bliss. Maybe it's that it gives rest or eliminates other things. Problems, surroundings. You understand that life is very much repeating itself. Our thoughts tend to come back again and again. Memories. Life is full of repeti-

2 Gotta Serve Somebody *is essentially a revised version of Don't Leave Me Be. – AC*

tions. If they are boring, they are boring. But if you enjoy listening to the sound of leaves or the wind or the sea, it's kind of a meditative thing. Then you can slowly get high with it.

We can find analogs in the people close to us, who also tend to repeat themselves. Sometimes it is funny, sometimes lovely. Like my kid runs to me and says, "Daddy, I love you!" and I say, "I love you too." How many times? I don't know. It works. If you evoke the emotions, it's a kind of reflex…

Conditioned reflex, I think.

Maybe, maybe. It sparks something. Something familiar is soothing. You go back home, and you want it to be like it was. Estonians, writers, and others who emigrated during the war, many of them did not want to come back to Estonia, not for political reasons maybe, but they knew that their Estonia was not there anymore. The town, the country they remembered, which was in their heart and soul, does not exist anymore. To see that it is all changed, hurts. Actually, in repetition there can be something very comforting. Maybe also intoxicating. But it is so and so: it can also be boring.

Yeah… I've seen that dualism reflected also in some of the feedback to your works. I stumbled on a student report of *Don't Leave Me Be*, which said that it is either so special that it's boring or it's so boring that it's actually very special.

Alright, maybe! [laughing]

But I think that, you know, we often think of repetition as the instant signifier of boredom and boringness. But you also give it a new spin in your books. As you just hinted in your answer, too, you see in it some profundity. The reality of everyday life is full of repetition, very important repetition.

It is negative when a writer repeats, but most writers repeat themselves. What else can they do? They can't become different personalities. Developing emotionally, psychologically… knowledge… well, maybe you can develop, I don't. Maybe we can also undevelop or get foolish.

With a beloved musician's new record, perhaps you're not seeking what he is doing that is new, but you want the thing you love. New songs, yes, new music – but if it's totally different, you might be disappointed.

I remember when Linkin Park released a new album in 2011, some people were extremely disappointed, because they took their music in a completely new direction. It didn't include the familiar aspect anymore.

Well yeah, sometimes we get used to… When Bob Dylan puts aside the acoustic guitar and begins something electronic – then it's… "Why?" Maybe he is also bored with his old stuff. He must play it again and again and again. How many more times?

The repetition aspect is very interesting to see in music and musical performers. They go to concerts to play the same songs over and over. And every time it must feel like the first time.

With repetitions also… if we take nature, chaos, and fractals. Chaos is needed, but so is all the structure of the small things in nature and the big things, like in space and in microbiology as well. We see similar structures very often and they repeat themselves very often. Why? It seems to be in variations. We also try to find new ways. We repeat the same exercise like in sports or in writing. But we are also searching for something new. Others might not see or notice it. It is our inner travel or journey. Take all the Mozart and it's all… Mozart.

Do you mean the essence remains the same or is inescapable, perhaps?

Both. Led Zeppelin has an LP called *The Song Remains the Same*. We can try to change but song remains the same.

I see. What about apathy or boredom in some of your characters? In *Indigo* the protagonist often felt apathy, not wanting to do anything. It is present also in *Death in Bulgaria*. You have said that this sort of short and fragmentary writing style that comes from not bothering to do something, "*ei viitsi*", reminds you of *Waiting for Godot*. In that play it seems to bring to life a kind of emptiness in this fragmentation: characters don't know what they're doing, what they're waiting for, and often they're confused about what's going on or even what their own motives are. But there is also no reference point. It's a very minimalist and bleak kind of play, creating on the one hand nihilism and absurdity and on the other randomness and secrecy. Do you think this fragmentation has a similar role to play in your works?

I haven't done those things knowingly, but yes, *Waiting for Godot* is also full of repetition and as a teenager I was, kind of… like everybody was, interested in Eastern practices and religions. Zen, you know, sitting quietly doing nothing, spring comes, grass grows, these kinds of things. Being passive, just observing, letting go.

Being part of something can take you to a kind of ecstasy or even bliss. You are happy with what there is, and you don't want to change the world or people or to control anything. It's better to be a part of it. The happiness of being included somewhere. Not consciously, but just to be a part of nature, the world, to be kind, not to think about myself, who I am, what I shall do. These thoughts can bring us to crisis because… what big things shall I do? I don't know. Maybe little things are also good things. It is from Brautigan – one should appreciate the small things, and I do. It was somewhere in Brautigan. I believe it was *Revenge of the Lawn*.

Many of your characters tend towards passiveness rather than agency because agency is what sets one person apart from others: these are my doings, my projects, my goals.

Maybe it is just my passive character. I don't know. I'm not able to analyze myself, but there are other people who, I don't know, lead armies… and are film producers, and it's good that those people exist. But not everybody is like that.

How was your trilogy, *Don't Leave Me Be*, *Gotta Serve Somebody*, and *Chicken Mutt*, born? Why did you decide to present the story in three parts?

I didn't have a plan. There are works that I can do, like a short story: I have an idea and it needs to have a "spring" or trigger or something that carries it. It needs to have tension. I can write it within a week or so, and then it's finished, with one energy. With longer texts, if I don't have small works, it's good to have something that I can do daily. In a way it is a pastime, it is a meditation. I do not know where life takes me. I let it happen. I follow what is happening. It is more like writing exercises. Just doing daily writing practice. Sometimes more, sometimes less. Then it slowly comes together; therefore, it has no story, no beginning or ending. It is just daily meditations.

Does the naturalism or realism also come from the diary-form, trying to maybe document one's life?

Some people think it is my life, but it isn't, because if you start writing it becomes something different. You can say it is a lie or it isn't… you start writing about your last day. The writing itself takes you somewhere else and you include your feelings from your last writing. It is not reality or what happened. It is just writing.

From your first novel onwards, it seems that one of the themes in your texts has been the coexistence of being present and, on the other hand, the state of being numb or maybe bored. In *Indigo* the kind of nice moments were giving way to more bored and listless moments. The same in *Don't Leave Me Be*, where the protagonist is contemplating the difference between good and bad lingering in the sense of "delaying". What makes an experience nice for you?

It depends. Situations are different. With *Indigo*, the stuff was written in the Soviet time. In Soviet Estonia it was very common for young guys to just hang around endlessly because they were critical towards the state but there was no point in fighting actively against it and there was no point in going along with it. This put them in a situation of being like a hippie. Being against the establishment but not wanting to fight it. Living in parallel. There were not many options of where to go, what to do. It was very limited. You lived like a monk. You tried to drink and smoke, but it's limited as well. [laughing]

Maybe it made some people… not philosophical, but meditative and… stay away from having much of a social life. It is possible that I have remained in this mode. As I have grown up there, well, we'll always listen to our teenage rock'n'roll. We can't help it; we go back to it again and again. Or our childhood also. Maybe it's not only in my writing, but in the writing of some Estonians. The stagnant situation in Soviet Estonia. Life has changed and I am happy about that.

MERILY SALURA (b. 1993) is a Ph.D. student of art history and visual culture at the Estonian Academy of Arts. Her Ph.D. dissertation concerns the temporality of creative processes, particularly painting and fiction writing, through the framework of Hans-Georg Gadamer's aesthetics. With a background in political philosophy, Merily has translated Hannah Arendt's *Origins of Totalitarianism* into Estonian as a part of the forthcoming *Open Estonian Book* series. She is currently compiling Peeter Sauter's prose poetry collection.

I Am Nature, Too

Joosep Susi reviews the poetry of Tõnis Vilu

Tõnis Vilu is one of the most outstanding and significant Estonian poets today. He has published eight[1] works in less than a decade, each remarkably distinct from the last. As fellow poet Hasso Krull wrote: "In a very short span of time, Vilu has brought more tonality to Estonian poetry than Krull, Kivisildnik, and Kesküla combined in the early 1990s." Referring to a remarkable transformation that shook the former truths and methods of Estonian poetry to the core, the remark is particularly meaningful.

Aside from Vilu, I doubt you could find a single Estonian author who has released eight high-quality but poetically unique works in such quick succession. The aim of this overview will be to highlight these different styles: I will briefly describe his earlier collections but dedicate more attention to his latest, which are substantial to yours truly.

With the debut collection *Oh seda päikest* (Oh That Sun, 2013) and its lyrical poems on environmental topics, Vilu proved himself to be one of the most linguistically sensitive authors in contemporary Estonian poetry. His works are dense and edgy, and written with sensitivity. The language is treated with intimacy and intensity: Vilu bickers with it, shakes it and bends it to achieve a unique kind of simplicity. Since his debut, Vilu's poems have been very compact; interweaving voices and a variety of levels and topics. Nevertheless, he manages to preserve accessibility, temporal transcendence, and a universal force. It appears that the author's poetry is becoming increasingly personal with every new book, though it is still conscious of theoretical, philosophical, social, and political issues. This is no doubt why Vilu earned the attention of critics and literary scholars early on.

Beginning with his second book *Ilma* (Without, 2014), each of Vilu's collections have been conceptual wholes and yielded to the "serial principle", in which the interaction between and development of individual poems is particularly important. The layers of meaning in one piece are often revealed in harmony with others and/or through the micro- or macro-narratives throughout the work. In an interview, Vilu put it this way:

"Different poems that are nevertheless strongly connected give a much more polyphonic image of the subject, creating a network of symbols like in a novel. I also enjoy the intermediacy or multiple levels that are created when a poem works both alone and in concert with others, and in various ways at that."

1 *Eight works isn't entirely accurate, as only seven have been physically published; Uus Eesti aed (A New Estonian Garden) was released digitally. One could also count his online poem "Thoughts Like Torn White Rags" (2013), which I will not address in this piece.*

Vilu's symmetrically structured collection *Without* has been called science-fiction. In the third-person, it is the journey of a wanderer through a desolate, frozen landscape conveyed in couplets. Literary scholar Jaak Tomberg has defined it as a suspended post-apocalyptic moment that allegorically reveals several burning core questions, which are present in all of Vilu's works. These include, for example, the lyric speaker and/as nature, the climate crisis, the ego and loneliness, adjustment, and adaptation. To be fair, all of Vilu's books contain social critique to some degree or another, probing the subject's difficulty adapting to the opaque contemporary cultural space.

The pervading theme of *Without* is created by recurrent elements and motifs, a fictitious universe, and a wanderer. Vilu's next collection, *Igavene kevad* (Eternal Spring, 2015), is an epic lyrical work that continues in a fantastic register. It features main and secondary characters, a clear motif, and a fictional world that is similarly frozen – both living beings and nature as a whole are stuck somewhere, unmoving. We can only ask ourselves how to move forward, change, transform, and breathe in the stagnation. Whereas the earlier work was composed of two-line strophes, the sensually intense *Eternal Spring* is constructed of fourteen-line free-verse sonnets and divided into three lengthy sections rooted in different voices. The latter aspect makes the collection particularly fascinating, and is practiced more in his later works. Narrating the first section is a female anthropologist who has found herself in a tiny off-limits village. The second and third sections are populated by a third-person male instructor and a male artist, respectively. A further twist takes place when the narration returns to the first person in a description of the artist's dream, prompting the reader to reevaluate the whole earlier fiction in retrospect.

Beginning with Vilu's digital collection *Uus Eesti aed* (A New Estonian Garden, 2015), he scrutinizes the topic of mental health more thoroughly than any other Estonian poet to date (this grows increasingly complicated in his later books and interweaves with several other topics). As the author himself has commented, it describes "a mental state that softly desires, and is slipping into, escapism." The monologue section "Before" comprises school-day memories mixed with present, topical musings. He expresses anxiety, a wish to escape the world, and anger towards the past and present inescapabilities. Essentially, *A New Estonian Garden* is also divided into three parts: the first is one of angst, the second of revenge-driven conflict, and the third drifts from the first-person to multiple perspectives; projecting a modern-day utopia conveyed by the making of a new metaphorical garden. The "I" perspective shifts into the "we" of romance, a condition of the new garden's existence. Now, everything is clear; now, peace is made with the present, the past, neighbors, and oneself. It is the emergence of Vilu's "positive agenda". Although desolation and twilight radiate from Vilu's earlier writing, he proves that he believes in empathy and love.

Mental-health topics take center stage in Vilu's subsequent works and with it, he shifts from an elliptical style to something closer to prose. While *A New Estonian Garden* ends with the lines: "darling tell me / I haven't gone crazy", his *Kink psühholoogile*

TÕNIS VILU · PHOTO BY KRIS MOOR

(A Gift to the Psychiatrist, 2016) focuses on a specific mental disorder: bipolar disorder. The epic autobiographical confession in poetic form has been called "documentary poetry", an "illness poem", and a "confession of one's clinical state". True enough, the divide between the lyric speaker and the author is razor thin. The book is also exceptionally physical in nature, which is given away by its cover design: the author photographed in water, his eyes concealed by dark swimming goggles and his lips painted cherry-red. Vilu's narrative is interspersed by more elliptical, rap-like, rhythmical, emotional, and sometimes even enraged poems ("revolutionary songs"), which are set on enlarged sections of the Roy-Lichtenstein-like cover photo. The blurb on the back cover reads:

"Life as a bipolar person is one big bout of anxiety, even when the meds are already working. The doctor told me I'll be taking the pills till the end of my life because, at some point, years from now, something bad might happen again; maybe even several times. So, all I can do is wait for the misfortune, trying to guess when it will arrive."

Yet, the writing itself isn't borne of this waiting: the narrator alternates cautiously between what happened earlier, how things were before the illness was under control, what life was like when he started medication, and how things are now. Retrospective accounts add depth to the narrative, as do musings over what life and relationships were like before and after receiving treatment, and what will come next: "What will

become of my kid? What is this powder bubbling within me doing to them? What will they be like when they're born?"

Vilu has written several blog posts about being bipolar and has discussed it during performances. The poetically-charged description of his medical condition is exceptionally rational, including digressions over the nature of the illness and many technical terms that raise broader questions: Who am I? What is this split within me? How are ego and body connected? How can I accept myself, reassemble my pieces, feel whole again, and distance from myself?

As literary scholar Aare Pilv put it: "The question is whether or not I am free to talk about myself; whether I am capable of freely conditioning myself; whether I am free to speak about myself as someone else or a third person."

Conflict with the psychiatrist leads to the question of reality and fiction; of the existence of illness as such. Specifically, the psychiatrist discovers that the speaker is a poet and is dissatisfied with how they are portrayed:

"No, no – it's just fiction, just literature, I caricaturized you, / extrapolated you and…" / "Nobody extricates me." / "That's too bad. What I mean to say is there's definitely some truth to it, but / you can't take it all so seriously. The other characters in it are / pretty much idiots, too." / "I see. / But you write rather, well… frankly. Does it mean you / believe your illness isn't real, either?" / "No, no, though… well, it's hard to say. I'm not the expert here. / The pain is real! Dark depression, memory gaps, / recovery – it's all real!"

A Gift to the Psychiatrist gradually moves from the personal level to become more political and critical of society. Vilu's depression-themed *Libavere* (Awryville, 2018) consistently ties mental brokenness to various levels of society. The work is visually jarring, the author seeming to incessantly bite his own tongue. Its poems are incorrectly constructed from a linguistic perspective, brimming with grammatical and phonetic "disorders".

The language of *Awryville* is chock full of meaning, its flawed nature complementing the speaker's psychological "defectiveness". At the same time, this doesn't inhibit reading comprehension. The various layers are mutually motivating: the lyric speaker has difficulties expressing himself, which makes him feel self-conscious and causes low self-esteem and depression. This sense of brokenness is revealed in Vilu's language itself: a faulty vehicle prevents him from expressing himself and others from understanding him, which only debilitates him further. Or vice-versa: since speaker is broken within and cannot express himself, the language is broken as a result. It is tangible when we read the text's errors and grammatical mistakes; you can tell that something is very wrong. A broader macro-narrative forms through the burgeoning disturbances and relatively accessible New Sincerity and once again climaxes with "WE"; with love. Lyric speaker can't fathom how someone like him can share in a utopic structure the likes of love ("WE"), but in the end, love brings everything together. It is, as they say, believed in.

The impact of *Awryville* also lies in the way that various layers of upside-down lust are constantly, almost effortlessly,

TÕNIS VILU · PHOTO BY KRIS MOOR

reconciled; in how the phonetic and grammatical mistakes are mentally "fixed". This leads, in turn, to a theoretical conflict that Jaak Tomberg and I have defined as such:

"In order to reach the thematic dimension, we need to automatically eliminate the crux of what *Awryville* constructs; to put parentheses around the errors; to push the errors onto a latent level. Only then can we clearly observe lyric speaker looking at himself from an outside perspective; wondering what people think of him; defining himself negatively; as well as how he points to the sub-language, now under narcosis, and legitimizes it."

It is by implementing these mistakes, with the help of hampered pronunciation, that the reader is immediately set on a meaningful, world-constructing dimension. The fact that one has difficulties reading the text aloud or in their heads means that they physically experience the full inability to express and to exist.

Tundekasvatus (Sentimental Education), which received the 2020 Cultural Endowment of Estonia's Award for Poetry, is also a finely arranged collection that touches upon recent uncomfortable political topics and places them in the most intimate of registers. It is poetry that pinpoints one social perspective during a precise moment in time, along with all the fantasies and tensions that accompany it.

On the most basic level, Vilu ties together two reflecting and interweaving narratives, which trace *a Bildung* and supersede every individual poem: a painful life in the speaker's homeland and a counterfactual life in Japan. The opening poem serves as the collection's clef (looking back at one's homeland from abroad, memory, collecting memories, etc.) and is gradually developed until the final piece ties together all the different ends/dimensions and many of the topics.

Whereas personal brokenness was most apparent on the grammatical/phonetic dimension in *Awryville*, thus giving it strong potential for physical sensation, *Sentimental Education's* brokenness is revealed through multiple dimensions, most strikingly on the similarly broken social/political level. The speaker's inner crisis is compared to social processes from a generational standpoint, including topics like environmental catastrophe and social governance (and even high- and late capitalism). The interweaving of layers of meaning allows Vilu's dozens of different

themes to gradually develop, transform, and renew. An array of alternating voices and constant appeals constructs the narrator's broken persona. Previously, I've called *Sentimental Education* a kind of alphabet book of poetry that uses hundreds of different styles – from ample intertextuality to parallelism.

Sentimental Education is also exceptionally sensitive in terms of language, containing several different linguistic dimensions (colloquial, journalistic, and many other specialized styles) without producing cacophony. Vilu's use of language is so flexible that even completely improbable pairs start to seem natural. Simultaneously and with the utmost fluidity, he switches between themes, narratives, dimensions, and focus at a dizzying pace, doing so primarily through language (both on the surface and thematically). A single line might include the lyrical speaker's psychological brokenness, scathing criticism of politicians, a statement addressed to the sun, a declaration of love, and more. Still, every element is interconnected in the only way possible.

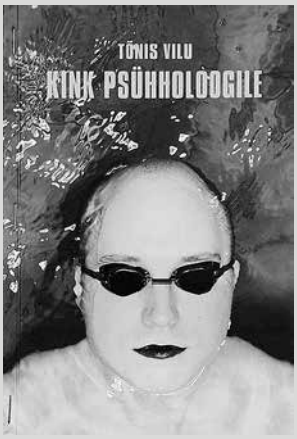
Vilu's latest poetry collection *Kõik linnud valgusele* (All Birds to the Light, 2022) turns to a traumatic early memory: it is addressed to a childhood friend who committed suicide. Taking the place of broader social/political statements, multiple voices, and changing linguistic registers are painful flashes of memory, tiny sensations, and individual moments. Childhood landscapes and scents, memories of playing with friends, mundane details – all remind him of a friend speaker was unable to help. It is a powerfully lyrical book where intense descriptions of nature blend with the speaker's mental universe; where the outer, inner, past, and present become indistinguishable from one another. Thus, statements made to the lyrical "you" are always statements made to oneself. The line between lyric speaker and his late friend grows hazy:

warm late-evening rain moist soil a smell
emanates from the window
outside rest a little from the burying now
my late friend let
it rain I lie in the ventilation window and
am a ventilation window cover myself
the extinguishing dripping
lampshade has had enough

All Birds to the Light is also a structurally homogenous work – Vilu's transition-rich poems are visibly similar as well. Still, you can also sense him walking the paths of his debut: the new collection has a definite lyric subject, an intense relationship with nature, and harmony between the inner- and outer worlds. Although Vilu's poetry books are entirely dissimilar, his writing is held together by a common worldview and sense of life: by a sentimental education, probing the deeper nature of humanity, and an intimate relationship to language. By belief in empathy and love. By knowing that "I am nature, too," to use Vilu's own words.

JOOSEP SUSI (b. 1989) is an Estonian literary researcher, critic and didactic, Junior Lecturer at Tallinn University and Junior Researcher at the University of Tartu, doctoral student of Tartu University. His main research areas are lyric theory, modern Estonian poetry and literary didactics.

A Gift to the Psychiatrist



TÕNIS VILU
KINK PSÜHHOLOOGILE
(A GIFT TO THE PSYCHIATRIST)
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pp. 51–56

Am I, after the whole course of treatment, a
better person now? I've screwed up an unbelievable amount
of shit over the little blip of my lifetime. I've told friends they're
bad people, have gotten into irrevocable arguments and
then completely forgotten the other person (just a cold and
polite hello on the street). I've excused my behavior with "I guess
we just weren't a good fit", "I needed a little spring cleaning in my life",
"I was just feeling so bad, I'd just gotten sick, I went crazy,
it wasn't me."
And I still believe myself.
I called one a slut, another an obsessive
overthinker who can never just let go.
Constant excuses and tardy
sucking up. Luckily, I've got a couple of friends left
who still put up with me, and my girlfriend, of course, and family.
But am I better now? Or a person
at all?
I'm a robot with two possible replies: a) go fuck yourself,
b) I'm sorry. Usually, one follows the other or
vice-versa. I'm a vending machine of insults, voluntary
and involuntary, just insert a compliment or a wavering smile
and I'll dump shit all over you. I'm a table leg who thinks
the table stands upon him alone.

And then, despising me despising myself (always myself,
myself), I try to cleanse myself in the sea,
“out in nature”, without managing to put an end to myself.
“Out in nature” is a joke, a deception.
But I always excuse myself (always myself, myself).
I’m sorry that I haven’t managed to put an end to myself.
I’m too strong and clever a shithead for that.

Everybody gon’ respect the shooter
but the one in front of the gun lives forever.
– Kendrik Lamar

Five days ago, I split my last pill, which I’d already
split once. I’m trying not to think about it.
I have to jiggle the handle multiple times whenever
I lock my front door, try it, and repeat to myself it
really is locked, though I still don’t believe it is.
On the way to the bus stop, I take off my backpack
again and again to open the outer pocket and touch
my wallet – yeah, got it, didn’t forget. Then, I check
the zippers a hundred times to make sure they’re closed.
I run back up to my fourth-floor apartment several times
to see if I left the stove on, even though I didn’t even
make breakfast that morning.
I don’t believe myself. I fret and shiver like a pale,
bullet-ridden corpse in a waiting room – on his
way to the other side of the gate. The waiting room
is a hallway, the walls marigold-orange.
In the few hours I manage to sleep, I have a recurring nightmare.
There’s a contraption shaped like an egg bowl that I’ve got
to lower my balls into. It has little spinning and whirring
razor blades that shave close to the skin and with the utmost
precision. Nothing bad happens, but sensing that the appliance
is just about to break and the blades will jab out and slice my balls
from my body with blood spraying everywhere is
incredibly excruciating enough. My underwear’s genital-supporting
touch feels more and more sickening
with every step.
I know I’ll have a new doctor someday, but
it’s like they’re at the far end of the universe. Through black matter,
through the oceans.
May your career be a famous one, Doctor.
Your bullet hit the mark. Or, who shot first?

In any case, I feel dead. Five days ago,
I split my last half-pill.
Five days ago, I split it – and I won't believe,
even if I say it a thousand times to myself.

Before, my personality came in stages: 200, 100, 50, and 25 mg.
Now, I'm a big, level plateau.
A plain of chaos. I'm afraid of myself. Afraid he will
return. I make diary entries to keep him away.
His invitations to the top-floor balcony, his invitations from
below, from the street. If necessary, then I could still get into the
nine-story dorm on Narva Road, slipping in behind a
student as they flash their fob. They won't
see me; I'll be the color of the gray walls.
I am a shadow.
I feel like now, only the unthinkable is still
thinkable and reasonable. I dream of a new world, one
within and around me. A completely different world. The
structures of the present are no longer stable; they're collapsing. I need
total escape. First, I must learn how to
not care about the present, how to believe in an
idea despite all the others – all doors –
being closed. I'm thinking up a new world!
If I could only sleep!
I suppose I knew what I was risking at the time, too, way
back at the very beginning, before the whole drug-fuss.
I kept myself going all night with coffee and Red Bull
and then the next day and the next day and
night, week, and month, just to finish that pointless
thesis. I sucked it out somehow, that A+,
and everything turned out okay.
Summer came but the agitation didn't fade. For years, it'd
wound itself up and placed its naïve expectations
on white nights – now, now I'm myself!
And the funniest thing of all was that people kept telling me
how well I'd managed. Glowing praise was flung around
like hot shots at a dive bar, but it all just fostered
my doubts. Every gushing compliment screams:
"Don't believe it! You don't actually deserve it!
Something's got to be wrong!"
And expectations are as high as the heavens,
the only ceiling for one who's swinging on emotions
though nothing can be secured to it.

I felt empty in autumn, as if summer had never happened. Later,
Grandma and I talked about Grandpa; she saw him in me –
I "finally" had time to be home and chat with her.
Grandpa'd had those traits, too, nothing
sensible at all, the inception itself is faulty, written
into the bloodline! It's that "hardworking" trait.
I just carry things forward, unconsciously adding
my own tinge that I'm unable to see. If I could,
then I'd probably be a parody of myself, but
would it also free me of that trait? I doubt it – the longest
and most unbroken line is one reflected between two mirrors.
There's a boundary in my life, a wall between what was before
the collapse and what is after. And now, threatened by
the next, the wall is growing even bigger.
What was before is gradually blurring and I can't
remember all the vivid details and incidents as
well as I could, say, a year ago. I try to recount
the same story over and over again, but it's grayer and
duller every time. Even the time after
the event is now dimming. I read my old blog and
aside of it being incredibly embarrassing, I can
barely remember anything from it. Maybe this
will be kind of like an old, forgotten blog one day, too –
alien and embarrassing. I attempt to revive myself, to
remind myself of something through the lives of others – real
and fictional, no matter that they're pretty much the same. I constantly
try to bind myself to something greater. Don't we
all? Maybe not at such a young age. Things
pass, as always, but now, they don't want
to stick anymore.
I remember being strictly apolitical. The newspapers were
ostensibly safer as well, the Russo-Georgian war did poke
something loose, but not as much as today's agonizing,
constant pressure of young yokels' boots –
I won't let myself be stomped on, I won't!
Life was closer to heaven somehow.
Oh, right – I do have one vivid recollection from right
before all the insanity: I'd just finished my thesis
and was heading out to the countryside, finally.
Jasmine was blossoming and its stupefying scent
mingled with warmth emanating from the fireplace.
That much is a definite: for me, there's no summer without jasmine;
there simply must be jasmine. I sat alone for a very long time,

TÕNIS VILU · PHOTO BY KRIS MOOR

I think it was drizzling a little, until every last fleck of golden
ember extinguished. I thought the fallen twilight was like
the end of something, though long-awaited sleep didn't
come that night and it startled me for good. Even that
has gotten kind of fuzzy.
I can make out gray patterns, mainly for how
to lose friends. Or doctors. It's a surprisingly similar process.
Not that I have to do much to achieve it –
it suffices to be myself. A forgetter and a dreamer.
I suppose the two don't really go together, which explains
the rift that divides and joins the gray patterns.
It's hard to dream up something on the basis of what's forgotten,
but yet, dreams about what doesn't exist
are the most vivid.
I read the news, it's chilly outside, I shouldn't
think about it, something inside me knows I can
cope much better if I don't remember it –
I dream of jasmine.

Translated by Adam Cullen

The Agony of the Imagined

by Leo Luks

Natalja Nekramatnaja's debut poetry collection *Sinine pojeng* (Blue Peonies) is severe, and truly exceptional in a year of otherwise polite and somewhat dull Estonian poetry. A perfunctory review would label it a classical work rooted in a hackneyed loser's voice.

The lyrical narrator is a woman, primarily pained by family traumas: a miscarried son, memories of an abusive father, a childhood in a bleak industrial Eastern Estonia, the deaths of loved ones, and more. This character observes reality in shades of black and white (p. 83) and is afflicted by homelessness and deformed lust (p. 76). Plenty of poetry has been written on similar topics before.

Nevertheless, Nekramatnaja's writing remains fresh and powerful thanks to the several interacting attributes. Firstly, her negative poems contain intense, irate, highly charged imagery. The dedication immediately embarks on this wave: "to the son / I killed" (p. 9). Still, the author does not overburden the poems with excessively grating curses or phrases. There's usually a change of tempo in which low-energy texts are suddenly dashed with something jarring like a punch to the face. Take this example:

> the impersonal child
> calls out something
> from the rear corner of the room
> in sign language
> receding further and further
> through the crowd
> I can't understand him
> it's like he's calling for help
> until the wind sweeps him away
> [...]
> I open the toilet door
> an angel wipes its ass with a sickle
> and calls out
> something
> I can't understand it
> until the wind
> sweeps confusion away too (p. 56)

The second stanza almost matches the first. As the poem's atmosphere is soft and agonizing, the brusque statement comes as a surprise and even a parody in the given instance.

Secondly, one should note the rhythmic repetition of imagery and subjects throughout the book that bind it into a well-arranged, tightly knit whole. Some images resurface after lengthy pauses, such as the abandoned son:

> the impersonal child draws a family
> in the air (p. 13)

> the watch daddy promised to give the
> baby I gave up having (p. 24)

> they say there's a lake in the corner of
> the garden of eden
> where all the unborn children swim
> (p. 28)

I write funny lines on the back of a
black-and-white postcard
to the son I've abandoned (p. 39)

Other times, Nekramatnaja arranges poems on a common theme in progression, allowing for continuity: on deportation (pp. 18 and 19), a stray dog (pp. 68 and 69), and the death of her abusive father (pp. 22–23 and 24). Some belong to a series in which one repeating image replaces another, such as looking into a mirror (pp. 14 and 15) and extended family (pp. 15 and 16).

Only by the middle of the book does another powerful thematic threat unwind: *biblical allusions*. The first instance of which is exceptionally powerful:

gangs of troublemakers on bleak streets
a trashed bus stop
yowling cats soviet *khruschchyovkas*
with broken windows
the stench of shale oil the mine's smoke-
stacks billowing
a little girl takes her drunk dad home
a proper beating as thanks
an empty stomach sidewalks covered
in litter and the smell of urine
a cock and Estonian slurs graffitied on
the grocery store window
stray dogs mating and digging through
heaps of trash

I close the window take off my glasses
let go of the memories
the filthy reek of hopelessness invades
my nostrils
I read the bible scratch my clit fall
asleep (p. 33)

The poem rides the waves of grim existence in derelict Eastern Estonia, but with a surprising twist. Although it initially seems like the Bible is brought in for shock value and contrast, the poem takes a turn where the narrator's life is threaded with biblical motifs.

we're coming from narva
we're going to jerusalem (p. 34)

IT'S RAINING CONSTANTLY IT'S
EVENING

on the way to calvary
I order a cold beer on a café patio

you know isaac is pure metaphysics
isaac's soles are aching pick me up
daddy he'd like to ask (p. 53)

but those who walk mount Moriah
they keep the very first silence (p. 55)

but
when grandpa died for the first time
sober[1] abel came to the feast
buck naked (p. 64)

It's worth mentioning that the *kaine/Kain* double entendre also appeared in Erkki Luuk's poetry collection *Präät ja Endil* (Präät and Endil). *Blue Peonies* isn't a single-topic book; rather, its universe and cast of characters gradually expands:

CALL ME ISHMAEL

yells a boy
who's teased… (p. 40)

Entwining in the narrator's world are trials endured by Jews and peripheral Estonian

1 The Estonian contains an untranslatable play on words involving "kaine" (sober) and "Kain" (Cain). – AC

communities, which are elevated to such a human plane that "woes and sufferings / all universal" (p. 34). It makes no difference whether you're in Estonia or Israel, for "the doors of all homes are closed as of today" (p. 28) and "the dogs of hell [are] amidst gethsemane" (p. 75). The biblical agony likewise cuts into the narrator's own personal space:

MY BROTHER GOT THE TOP BUNK

because it's paradise above
because the lord is above
but hell and the devil are below (p. 21)

Expressed another way, the narrator stands in the center of a dark, empty room bereft of a single ray of light or hope:

actually we're in boundless darkness
in darkness like this (p. 47)

The overpowering mood that comes with occupying such a space is resignation, occasionally replaced by contorted lust:

finally I cast off my clothes
amidst
a dead space
totally nude
I rub my nipples
[---]
sometimes there's no desire
to do anything else
no energy
if you stare into emptiness
to discover
emptiness (p. 76)

A hint to the mysterious persona behind the Nekramatnaja pseudonym slips from one of the poems: "…a mihkelson-like voice whines in a maternal / womb…" (p. 25). The remark isn't made casually. Ene Mihkelson[2] is clearly one of the author's greatest role models, and her influence is palpable throughout the work: take the lingering sense of itinerance or the cerebral jaunts that appear in the last poem and elsewhere.

A balance between the lyrical and the narrative is Mihkelson-like overall. In such texts, Nekramatnaja tends to set the mood with unusual events rather than indulgent emotional expressions, and what's more, the agonizing situations compress the lyrical subject, tacking them into place ("I stand in the snow in my yard once again and am afraid to move", p. 29). The subject of the alien gaze threatens the spell-caster with oblivion. Nekramatnaja's Mihkelson-like tendencies are perhaps most pronounced in the following poem:

I flip a switch the room fills with light
outside, on the other hand – darkness
someone looks in through the window
I don't see them
their gaze remains unattainable
they know all my secrets
now I look out of the window
sacrificing time and eternity
I turn on the television
protests in charlottesville
right-wing extremists attacking blacks
who would light a lamp in the darkness
I walk onward the lights go out
who would light a lamp in the darkness
the glow of TVs flickers from lone windows
I am invisible (p. 46)

The poem takes place in the earlier dark room. The speaker turns out to be invisible, but what's more bizarre is that she confidently asserts a stranger is looking

2 *Ene Mihkelson (1944–2017) was an Estonian writer of prose and poetry.*

in but cannot be seen. Consequently, the speaker's voice is also disembodied, and the poem's space is being created by another separate gaze that penetrates the lyrical ego and blends with them. An "impersonal individual" forms – coincidentally a recurring theme.

Uncertainty swells to become the narrator's all-encompassing doubt regarding her poetic reality and suspicion of the imagined. This is revealed through recurring images ("HOW TO TELL YOUR SON YOU MADE HIM UP", p. 50) and as a generalization:

> maybe it's mere conception
> maybe you can't be sure of anything anymore
> maybe all of us here are imagined (p. 72)

A character's departure from the text leaves a worn, showy, and even cliché impression. Upon first reading, I didn't focus much on the dimension and regarded it as a stylistic blunder made by a debut author. Literature is imagined, so why make a point of emphasizing it? But is that really the truth? Is every written work nothing more than pure fancy to everyone? Does it also apply to lyrical poetry? What role does the poet's persona play in the reception of their work? Isn't it true that the most common manner of poetry's consumption is the poet's inclusion into an aesthetic reception? One that presumes that if the writing doesn't detail the author's life through artistic embellishment, then it at least expresses their true feelings, convictions, and moods? Isn't the connection especially apparent with great female poets whose brilliant presence strengthens the writing's aesthetic impact (Estonian examples might include Marie Under, Doris Kareva, Kristiina Ehin, and Sveta Grigorjeva)?

I don't enjoy rooting around in an author's life and always try to cast such layers aside, even in my analysis of Nekramatnaja's work. However, it would be false to claim that such discussions only arise because of the ignobly inquisitive appetite of the masses. As several researchers have noted, contemporary Estonian literature, including poetry, gravitates strongly towards autobiographical tendencies. Thus, one naturally assumes that behind the Nekramatnaja persona is a talented young woman from Eastern Estonia with an unhappy childhood and the ability to lift poetry with autobiographical DNA to artistic heights. Well-read readers should allow this assumption to drift on the fringes of their consciousness and simply enjoy Nekramatnaja's fine writing. I find it fitting that the young author hides behind a pen name, not wishing to shine bright in the media.

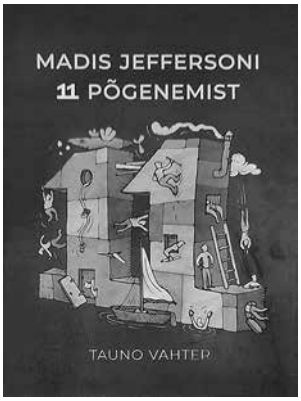
Unfortunately, it's impossible to completely shut yourself off from literary gossip, and so I've heard that Nekramatnaja is actually a man with an academic background in literature. Such knowledge would place the collection in a whole new context: no autobiographical angst and no murdered son, but merely the agony of the imagined. Give it a try, I suppose!

LEO LUKS (b. 1976) is a philosopher, writer, and literary critic. He is an instructor of philosophy at the Estonian University of Life Sciences and a researcher at the Under and Tuglas Literature Center. Luks has published two poetry collections, a monograph on literary philosophy, and three collections of essays.

The Story Behind the Book: A Man Perpetually on the Run

by Tauno Vahter

The protagonist of *Madis Jeffersoni 11 põgenemist* (The 11 Escapes of Madis Jefferson) is a restless soul who is constantly fleeing something: home, conscription, work, Siberia, prison camps, and insane asylums. Although Madis Jefferson is a fictional character, a great deal of his life overlaps seamlessly with a real historical figure – Johannes Lapmann.



TAUNO VAHTER
MADIS JEFFERSONI 11 PÕGENEMIST (THE 11 ESCAPES OF MADIS JEFFERSON)
Tänapäev 2021, 256 pp.
ISBN 9789916171059

Johannes Lapmann was born in the northwestern Estonian fishing village of Kibru in 1913. From the beginning, the five-child family was stalked by all kinds of odd and misfortunate events. His father died of poisoning after buying "medicine" from a traveling snake oil salesman, one of his brothers was killed in an incident involving a firearm, and one of his two sisters perished at a young age. As if raising her surviving children alone wasn't trouble enough for Johannes's mother, he was struck by unbridled wanderlust from a very early age. We know for a fact that he stowed away on cargo ships at the age of 13 or 14 and made it to the Finnish town of Viipuri (Russian Vyborg), where police detained him and sent him home. Next, he managed to jump a train to Riga and hide on a cargo ship en route to Belgium. Lapmann went ashore in Ghent but was soon imprisoned in Antwerp, from where his uncle eventually helped him return to Estonia.

After serving in the Estonian navy, he took a legitimate job on a cargo ship that sailed mostly between Europe and North Africa. Then, a document in the Immi-

grant Records at the US National Archives shows a Johannes Lapmann was aboard a Norwegian merchant vessel, which he deserted in Boston in February 1938. Perhaps it was a fortunate choice, as the ship hit a mine near Norway's Lofoten several years later and sank. Lapmann soon resurfaced in New York. There are accounts of him walking around the city with a guitar and taking singing lessons – perhaps all he wanted was to make it in the entertainment business. Judging by photographs of him at the time, he was a tall and handsome man.

Though Lapmann worked as a painter and did other odd jobs to get by in America, he also discovered and grew quite close to a very unusual community: members of the local diaspora who formed the Association of Estonian Laborers' Clubs and started a newspaper titled Uus Ilm (New World). Broadly speaking, they comprised Estonian communists living in the US. By various estimates, between three- to four-thousand Estonians were living in New York City at the time, and many of them had backgrounds in seafaring. Most young Estonian women who emigrated to the US worked as domestic servants, but many of the men had fled Estonian authorities after a failed communist uprising in 1924. Sailors commonly had bones to pick with their employers and were closely tied to the union movement. Put together, these components led to New York City being home to a large community of leftist Estonians, some of whom genuinely believed that Soviet workers were happy and free.

Although "Madison Jefferson" takes a detour into the French Foreign Legion, there is no information that Lapmann did the same. Several of his seafaring companions did join, however: close to two-hundred Estonians were on the roster. I used the memoirs of those Estonians and former legionnaires of other nationalities when I invented his encounters.

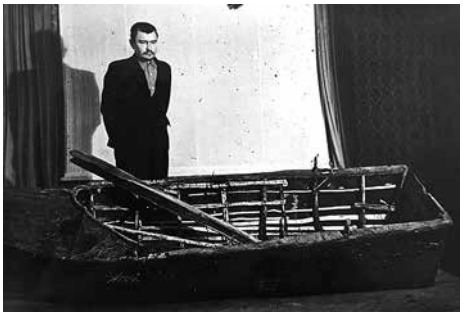
JOHANNES LAPMANN 1938 IN NEW YORK (RIGHT). · PHOTO FROM ARCHIVE

Meanwhile, Lapmann received a new passport from the Estonian Consulate and returned home in 1940. After Estonia was annexed by the USSR, he – a true idealist – immediately joined his local Soviet and, shortly before the arrival of Nazi forces, was even made its chairman. In the book, Madison Jefferson and the Soviet forces flee by ship to Kronstadt to allow for a very dramatic account of the Juminda mine battle, a.k.a. the "Russian Dunkirk". The

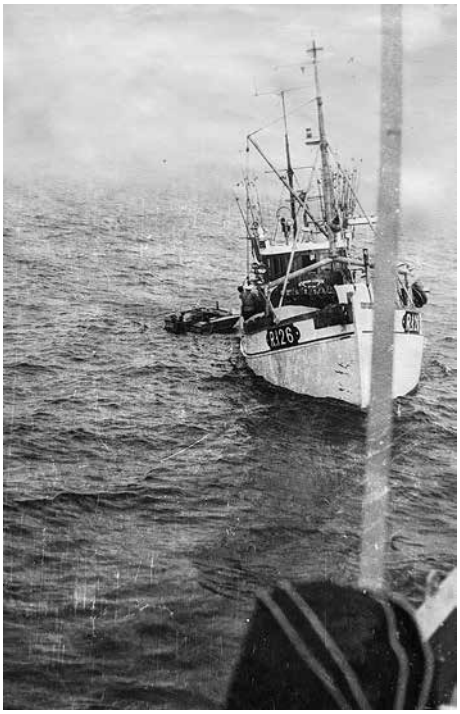
memoirs and fates of those aboard one of the ships served as a basis for Jefferson's account, though Lapmann himself wasn't at sea at the time: he and two companions took a motorcycle to Leningrad.

The group of Estonian communists is taken to Chelyabinsk, deep into Siberia, where Jefferson's and Lapmann's storylines realign. It is here he discovers that all the fanciful tales about the Soviet state and life within it were false. So, Lapmann/Jefferson decides to escape to America at any cost. Traveling with falsified documents, he starts making his way to the border of Tadzhikistan and Afghanistan to make contact with British forces. Alas, he's immediately caught and thrown into a local prison. On the fly, he conjures a story about being an American who was visiting Estonia in 1941 when he was caught up in the war. And now, he just wanted to get home! After months of insistent untruths, the local security forces permit him to travel to the US Embassy in Moscow. There, after long hours of questioning, even the US authorities are unable to decide whether or not to believe the man. As Lapmann fears being sent to the front line to fight, he decides to abscond to Arkhangelsk – a city in Russia that is conveniently the location of a US/UK Lend-Lease office. He finds work as a driver and mechanic, padding his income with speculating until the end of the war. In the autumn of 1945, Lapmann strikes a deal with members of the Royal Navy Shore Party to be taken aboard the last ship to the West: the SS Empire Peacemaker. Once again, he's arrested on the wharf. Though an informant could have been responsible, it didn't help that the man was wearing four pairs of pants and three suit coats!

After several years of complicated and mind-bending interrogations, Lapmann is ultimately accused of espionage and sent to a Siberian prison camp, though the Soviets still do not know his true identity. Nevertheless, as a skilled worker he is allowed to work a relatively cushy job at a bread factory's pumping station. In September 1948, he manages to escape once again by scaling a three-meter fence and running through the dead of night to the coupler of a departing freight car. It serves as his mode of transportation for two and a half weeks, hiding in the forest by day and riding the rails at night, until he makes it home via Leningrad and Tallinn. Showing up at his uncle's door for just a handful of minutes under the cover of night, Lapmann hears that his mother and sister still reside at his childhood home and one brother fled to Sweden. Remarking that there's nothing in Estonia for him, Lapmann immediately sets out to build a boat. In a few weeks' time, he manages to construct a vessel with a canvas-wrapped hazelnut-wood frame and a salvaged border guard's poncho that he fashions into a sail. On November 1, 1948, Lapmann crosses the stormy Gulf of Finland and lands on the tiny island of Kalvö, about 40 km to the west of Helsinki. He knocks on the first door he comes to and is arrested



SELF-CONSTRUCTED VESSEL IN WHICH LAPMANN CROSSED THE STORMY GULF OF FINLAND 1948. · PHOTO FROM ARCHIVE



ESCAPE TO GOTLAND. · PHOTO FROM ARCHIVE

almost immediately. After years and years in prison, how is he to know that Finland has rented the Porkkala Peninsula to the USSR for use as a naval base?!

Lapmann tests out several complex fictions, but his true identity is uncovered and he's sentenced to 25 years in the Gulag. Nevertheless, he's released in 1958 and starts planning his next escape without delay. To do so, Lapmann scouts Central Asia and the Turkish border, albeit finding no favorable opportunities for escape through the Iron Curtain. While in prison, Lapmann came up with theory after theory on how to reform the Soviet economy, each more Daedalian than the last. Some proposals are surprisingly feasible, but at other points he writes to Jackie Kennedy demanding money for her late husband allegedly plagiarizing his ideas.

In 1972, Lapmann steals a marine-biologist team's speedboat, adds a second motor, and decides to escape to Gotland, Sweden overnight. He crosses the maritime border in the early hours of the next morning, is spotted, and the chase begins. In the end, Lapmann is caught on board a Danish fishing vessel a mere 20 miles off the island's coast. He is forcibly removed, taken to KGB headquarters once again, and sent to a military mental hospital in Chernyakhovsk, where an array of gruesome "medical" procedures are performed upon him. Four years later, he is finally allowed to transfer to an Estonian mental institution, from which he repeatedly escapes to hide both locally and in Turkmenistan. It is only in 1989 that a court decides he no longer poses any threat and may live freely. And again, Lapmann's life takes a radical turn: he meets an American journalist who agrees to write him a letter of invitation to travel to the US. Weaving a vibrant blend of promises, he borrows enough money from relatives to fly, legally, from Leningrad to New York in October 1990. There, Lapmann submits his undesired writing left and right while living primarily in homeless shelters. In March 1993, Johannes Lapmann died in a Lutheran homeless shelter in Washington D.C. We can only wonder if he finally felt free after all his incredible efforts.

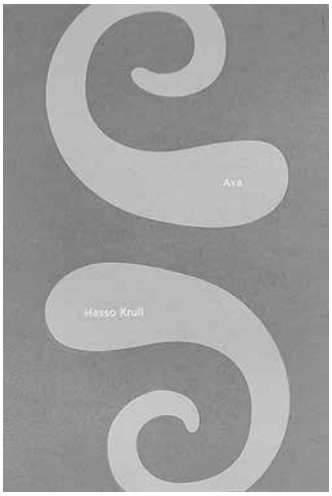
The 11 Escapes of Madis Jefferson is based on archival materials found in Estonia, Russia, and the US.

TAUNO VAHTER (b. 1978) is an Estonian publisher and translator. *The 11 Escapes of Madis Jefferson* is his second novel.

Book Reviews

by Leo Luks and Eret Talviste

HASSO KRULL · PHOTO BY KRIS MOOR



HASSO KRULL
OPENING: EIGHTY-SIX POEMS
Kaksikhammas, 2021. 112 pp.
ISBN 9789916954713

Hasso Krull's *Opening* is the author's strongest poetry collection from the last decade. It is profoundly polyphonic, and a meeting place for varying, and even contrary, voices, exorcists, emotional tones, storylines, and atmospheres.

Opening is a densely and carefully composed whole. It can even be considered a single incantation infused with lyrical intoxication. Krull accomplishes this with rhythmically interweaving threads that primarily include the word *ava*, "opening" (not to mention *vari*, "shadow"). Krull's cantus firmus is apparent from the very first poem, creating a space for the rest of the work.

The opened poetic world is tightly layered, its main structural principle being myth. *Opening*'s myths are synthetic and kaleidoscopic, harmoniously populated by characters and archetypes taken from various legends and (hi)stories: The story of Dionysus and Ariadne stands out from the fray due to the frequency of the characters' appearances, the concluding quote is borrowed from Nietzsche, and the poetic strain of enchantment that pervades the book is expressed most purely through the repetition of spellcasting.

Opening is also lightly humorous; sometimes downright funny. We should note that myth is a serious thing and when approached by a joke, then the result should either be parody or something grotesque if it is sarcastically distorted. However, this doesn't happen here: comedy and gravitas balance out. One of Krull's techniques is

to weave literary paraphrases into "serious" discourse:

Vercingetorix said: Caesar, you may relax

the day will come on land and sea
soon, you'll be stabbed (p. 14)

Philosophers and philosophies are teased, or even jabbed, most openly:

philosophers fall silent they gather in
Plato's cave
to discuss
what it feels like to be a bat (p. 31)

the parade progresses slowly carrying signs
Socrates Plato Descartes
identity reality (p. 37)

Although philosophers are roughly ridiculed in *Opening*, the book itself is not free from the sin of abstract thought. Extrapolating aphorisms occasionally surface from the vortex of dreamlike events, such as:

to live several lives partially
or one life fully (p. 20)

life is an exception of exceptions
it cannot sustain itself
or be the exact same organism (p. 31)

opportunities are final
truths that cannot be destroyed
or prepared (p. 33)

In addition to Krull's obvious mocking tone, one can identify philosophical allusions. The most recognizable is to Friedrich Nietzsche, who endeavored to combine art and philosophy into Dionysian creation. Mythical space-time is phantasmagorical and rejects linear logic, particularly when some stones in its foundation were not formed from Indo-European material, as is the case in many of Krull's collection: the lyrical narrator's experiences are often ambiguous and even disjointed:

I sit in the garden and listen to larksong
but my neanderthal soul
hears something entirely different
it hears a distant rumbling (p. 24)

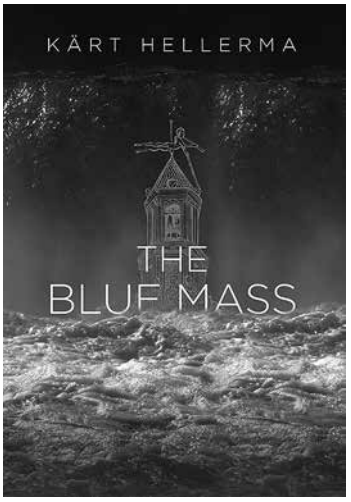
Appearing alongside the pyrotechnics of fantasy are several autobiographical poems that lack a single artistic discomfort and can even be called the book's mundane layer. Critically speaking, such topics should typically be deemed unfit for such a work of poetry. Nevertheless, each instance meshes with the whole, becoming unearthly and acquiring the overarching ecstatic emotion. The most genuine of these manifests in a plain poem in which the questions asked by a child waiting for their mother become spell-like through repetition, just like everything else in *Opening*:

when is mommy coming home
I don't know
but when's she coming home
in about two hours
does that mean in two minutes
no two hours from now
I can't wait (p. 58)

Every layer I've highlighted intertwines in Krull's poems, and no doubt encounters others that remain hidden from my critical gaze, an intoxicating cycle of significance. Open your mind and join in!

An initial version of the text was published in the magazine Keel ja kirjandus 5, 2022.

KÄRT HELLERMA · PHOTO FROM ARCHIVE



KÄRT HELLERMA
SININE MISSA
(*THE BLUE MASS*)
EKSA, 2022, 184 pp.
ISBN 9789916677223

Kärt Hellerma (b. 1956) is an Estonian writer whose debut book, *Alchemy*, appeared in 1997. She has since published in a variety of genres, including novels, poetry, and short stories. Her recently published book *The Blue Mass* presents both an English translation (by Adam Cullen) as well as a reprint of the Estonian version of Hellerma's novella of the same name, which originally appeared in 2008.

The Blue Mass is dazzling, almost surreal, like the azure waters and blue skies that mark the parameters of longing that can never be reached. The narrator conceives herself as a creature of water and starlight, yet she very much exists in her human form; contemplating fleshly desires, the nature of love, and what it means to be a woman at a specific place and time. Her place is a tiny Swedish island and her time is our contemporary moment, where she muses about a friendship with a Catholic priest.

The Blue Mass, with its poetic yet critical prose, weaves together the abstract and the material, and by doing so echoes modernist writers, such as Virginia Woolf, and also much less known Olive Moore. Hellerma's writing also brings to mind Hélène Cixous and other French feminists who were among the firsts to write about a woman's body and its passions in a mythical context. There is also a parallel between Hellerma and Elena Ferrante, whose prose is violently honest. Although Hellerma is less fleshly and more poetic, her writing, which has been translated to Swedish, Finnish, Czech, and Russian, certainly looks at life through a woman's, and feminist, gaze.

The Blue Mass, which originally appeared in Estonian as one of the four autofiction-style travel stories in a collection of the same name, is a beautiful, rich and timely addition to introduce Hellerma's work to English-speaking readers.

ERET TALVISTE (b. 1991) is an Estonian literature scholar and critic.

TRANSLATORS IN KÄSMU · PHOTO BY DMITRI KOTJUH

Translators: The Barn Swallows of Estonian Literature

Katja Novak's overview of the 2022 Translators' Seminar organized by the Estonian Literature Center in Käsmu, Estonia from June 10th to 15th.

Translators of Estonian literature are like swallows who return to their metaphoric literary homeland to gain new experiences, be inspired by new ideas and, naturally, take back a suitcase stuffed with the latest books.

Although there are fewer than one million Estonians in Estonia, the number of speakers around the world is much higher than one would expect and the language's reach thus broader than many would believe. The quadrennial Translators' Seminar is a perfect example of this, as I imagine it is the only place where one can hear so many different accents in Estonian.

Even the boulders of Käsmu start to write when the translators arrive to the seaside

ANNA MICHALCZUK-PODLECKI · PHOTO BY DMITRI KOTJUH

village. On the very first night, *kodustatud* (I'll explain momentarily) Norwegian translator Øyvind Rangøy warned fellow participants that Käsmu is dangerously conducive to writing: the last time he attended the seminar and jotted down his notes, he himself ended up becoming an Estonian writer. This year, the notebook that organizers gave attending translators was much larger than the previous one.

Kodustatud translators are those who, for some reason or another, found their way to Estonia years ago and ultimately decided to stay. Take me, for example – a translator into Estonian; or Kriszta Tóth, who translates into Hungarian; or Adam Cullen who translates into English by day but has likewise become an Estonian writer. The word *kodustatud*, which means to have settled, to feel comfortable and at home (kodu), imparts a warm and cozy sensation with multiple layers of meaning. It applies to those who, at some point, realized that Estonia is part of their lives for good.

Anyone who has organized a large event knows the sense of relief and dissipating stress once it's over. Yet, much work still lies ahead for the Estonian Literature Center – Ilvi Liive-Roosipuu, Kerti Tergem, and Elle-Mari Talivee – as I very much hope that all the over 40 translators who attended will soon reach out to bother them about certain books or authors. How much of a bother can it be, though? I imagine it's nothing but pleasure on both sides. I'd especially like to applaud the Estonian Literature Center's foresight to invite translators who are just beginning their career.

One of these novices, Tony Allen (US English), said he most enjoyed hearing the guest authors' thoughts and how their books came to be. Paris Pin-Yu Chen

TONY ALLEN · PHOTO BY DMITRI KOTJUH

(Taiwanese Mandarin) believes the authors' stories and background information will be a great advantage in understanding and translating their works in the future, and said to have learned a great deal from the experienced translators about how they work with authors.

Another great benefit and a blessing was that after their 40-minute slot, many guest authors remained in Käsmu until later that evening or the following day, giving us an opportunity to get to know one another better in a casual environment. Heidi Iivari, a *kodustatud* Finnish translator living in Tartu, said the seminar program was very rich and comprehensive but also included ample time to unwind. Although she interacts with Estonian writers on a daily basis and is probably better aware of their activities than translators who live abroad, the seminar still provided her with a wealth of new information.

The last day included an open forum where participants could exchange ideas and practical knowledge about pitching translations to publishers – invaluable for beginners and seasoned translators alike.

For me, the most touching remark was made by Turid Farbregd (Norwegian): "I've taken part in many translators' seminars over the years but, every time, it feels like the latest was the very best. It inspires me to keep reading and promoting Estonian literature."

Numerically, the Käsmu seminar was as follows: four full days, five nights, 40+ translators (over fifteen of which were first-timers), a few publishers, 25 Estonian writers, one dog, lots of laughs and hugs, an endless sea, and something else that cannot be put into words.

Each guest author was interviewed by

GUILLAUME GIBERT · PHOTO BY DMITRI KOTJUH

creating a very intimate and friendly environment. "New Estonian classics" such as Rein Raud and Andrus Kivirähk were among the established writers, though there were fresh literary faces as well. One morning was spent at the Estonian Children's Literature Center in Tallinn, where recent works and their more-recent translations were reviewed.

Translators of Estonian literature are ordinary people. We can be loud and soft-spoken, smiling and laughing, coffee-bingers and cold-water swimmers. We might flit away to translate between lively conversations, leave our laptops behind, write in neat rows, type a few lines into mobile notepads, be camera-shy, and give evening TV interviews. Translators and interpreters. Everyone fit into the group picture and other images were recorded in our memories. Until we meet again. And we will.

What is Estonian literature to you?

Guillaume Gibert (French)

To me, fine Estonian literature is like a field covered in flowers – an Estonian field, sweeping and diverse. The language is very colorful and musical.

Recent translations: I don't have much experience yet, but I'm currently working on short stories by Lilli Luuk.

Anniina Ljokkoi (Finnish)

Valdur Mikita wrote that an Estonian is the kind of person who holds a mushroom knife in one hand and a smart phone in the other. And I thought: that's what Estonian literature is like, too. All the authors who spoke in Käsmu this year mentioned nature. It's a very Estonian

ANNIINA LJOKKOI · PHOTO BY DMITRI KOTJUH

thing to do. At the same time, they're all very technologically savvy. A presence in dual worlds shines through their writing. If I were to pick a specific metaphor, some kind of animal, then it'd be a cross between a dog and a fox. A domesticated pet on the one hand and a wild animal on the other.

Recent translations: The newest issue of the Finnish-language Estonian poetry anthology *Nipernaadi* was published this spring; I'm the editor-in-chief. Currently, I'm translating poems by Maarja Pärtna. Another project is a geographical map of Estonian poems with their Finnish translations. I've been working on it for three years and there's constantly something new being added: vironrunokartta.fi.

Anna Michalczuk-Podlecki (Polish)

To me, Estonian literature resembles the giant fish Ahteneumion from Andrus Kivirähk's *The Man Who Spoke Snakish*. He had long whiskers and fur and when he lay on the bottom of the sea, he was invisible. About every other eon, he'd surface. The character Hiie happened to spot the fish and chat with him. We translators are rather similar: occasionally, we travel to Estonia, breathe Estonian air, and acquire and read Estonian books. It's how we get a little closer to that fish. I feel like Kivirähk's creature and Estonian literature, which grew out of the language, are both ancient. The fish symbolizes Estonian literature first, then oral literature, folklore, etc. It all leads to what can be read in books. If literature had physical form, I'm sure it'd be a fish. Ahteneumion's surfacing in Kivirähk's novel was his very last before returning to the seabed. I hope Estonian literature's fate will be different because we translators are here and won't allow it to sink.

DAILA OZOLA · PHOTO BY DMITRI KOTJUH

Recent translations: In 2021, Andrus Kivirähk's *November* and *Tilda and the Dust Angel*. In 2020, Kivirähk's *The Man Who Spoke Snakish*. My translation of Paavo Matsin's *Gogol's Disco* will be published this summer and currently, I'm working on Vahur Afanasjev's *Serafima and Bogdan*.

Daila Ozola (Latvian)

Estonian literature is like a mythical Poku, which looks like a tussock but is actually a living being. It's curious; it wants to see new places and try new things. Though it learns a great deal from others, it never loses its distinct character. It's a little shy and freezes up if it receives too much attention. It's much older than it seems and much quicker than it looks. It has many friends.

Estonian literature possesses an ancient quality and strong ties to nature. Whereas Pokus enjoy keeping their feet stuck in damp ground, Estonian literature sometimes likes it when readers' eyes are damp. It is fond of humor and blossoms anew after every winter.

Recent translations: In 2021, Ilmar Tomusk's *Digi-Crazy School* and *Wolf's Friends*, Kadri Hinrikus's *Dachshund and Dane*, and a selection of Kristiina Ehin's poetry (co-translated with Guntars Godiņš). Earlier this year, my translations of Sirje Noorsalu's *Dotty, the Lucky Parakeet* and Mika Keränen's *The Finnish Pizza* were published.

Tony Allen (English)

If Estonian literature had a physical form, I'd say it'd be a lilac bush. It doesn't grow in any specific direction, but at just the right moment it'll produce the most vivid colors and shades – pink, white, or violet – and

MAXIMILIAN MURMANN · PHOTO BY DMITRI KOTJUH

an intoxicating scent that stays with you for a very long time.

Recent translations: I'm just a beginner. I started last year when I received third place in a translating competition. The Estonian Literature Center was a main supporter of the event, which is why they invited me to join the seminar. Just for practice and out of personal interest, I started translating Albert Kivikas's *Names in Marble*. However, the seminar has inspired me to translate Estonian children's literature.

Maximilian Murmann (German)
If Estonian literature were a particular figure, I'd say it would be a Näkk. Similar to the Nixies in Germanic mythology, Näkks are water spirits from Estonian folklore that lure people into the water with their beauty and singing. Näkks can change their appearance and also their gender, depending on whom they want to lure. But Estonian literature is certainly not as dangerous as a Näkk.

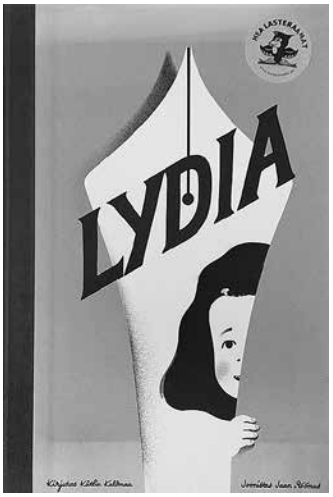
Recent translations: I translated Jaan Kross' classic novel *Vastutuulelaev* with Cornelius Hasselblatt. My second translation was the children's book *Lydia* by Kätlin Kaldmaa and illustrated by Jaan Rõõmus. The book tells the story of Lydia Koidula (1843-1886), who lived at a time when there was no independent Estonia and fervently pursued her calling, against all odds.

KATJA NOVAK (b. 1998) is a translator, poet, and member of the Estonian Writers' Union.

Children's Book Reviews

by Loone Ots, Jaanika Palm, Kadri Naanu, and Jaanus Vaiksoo

KÄTLIN KALDMAA · PHOTO BY KRIS MOOR



KÄTLIN KALDMAA
LYDIA
Illustrations by Jaan Rõõmus
Hung 2021, 44 pp.
ISBN 9789949731985

Kaldmaa's *Lydia* is the story of a little girl who grows up to become an esteemed poet. The author undertook the daring task of writing a childlike and educational book about the most revered female historical figure in Estonia: Lydia Koidula, born Lydia Emilie Florentine Jannsen (1843–1886), who is a symbol of the Estonian national awakening. I can say that Kaldmaa's goal is fully achieved – something confirmed by the 2022 Cultural Endowment of Estonia's Award for Children's Literature.

Much has been written about Koidula in Estonia, but mostly for an adult audience. On the cover, young Koidula peers at the reader through heavy stage curtains. Opening the book is the same as opening a door to the past. But will a child identify with the message? To them, the word "past" sometimes equates to a fairy tale. *Frozen*'s Elsa is more recognizable and identifiable to them than Estonia's first female poet. Kaldmaa signed herself up for a true challenge.

What's more, Lydia's youth coincides with tremendous changes throughout the entire world: the dawn of the Industrial Era. It is impossible to fit the historical background into a slender children's book, though it isn't meant to. It suffices for the author to occasionally reference the transformations: women aren't yet allowed to publish under their own name, but educated persons are starting to affirm that Estonian, the peasant language, is as worthy as every other tongue. Here, the author brings

up another legendary Estonian poet – Kristjan Jaak Peterson, who would have been a generation-and-a-half older than Koidula – and in doing so makes a purposeful anachronistic error: Peterson's poetry was unknown in Koidula's lifetime. But prose isn't a history textbook. You can fib a little, compress, and add in the name of something good. A writer has the authority to emphasize whatever they wish.

For example, *Lydia*'s cover art references the fact that Koidula was also Estonia's first original playwright, though the text makes no direct mention of it. Instead, Kaldmaa focuses on other significant moments in the writer's life, all of which are critical points in Estonian cultural history. Her lifetime also includes the era of the first periodic Estonian-language newspaper and the first Song Festival. Lydia herself helps to found both in cooperation with another symbol of the Estonian national awakening: her father, Johann Voldemar Jannsen.

If we study the back cover carefully, we can see a quill – something few modern-day children will recognize. There are so many fascinating details that require explanations, such as a dated map with different names for the towns and cities Estonians know so well, poems written in archaic Estonian. Kaldmaa brings up the head of the university and philosophy students. Someone will need to break down the complex sentence: "Intelligent, educated women aren't looked upon well in society." But the author isn't at fault. On the contrary: her belief in a child's ability to comprehend is praiseworthy.

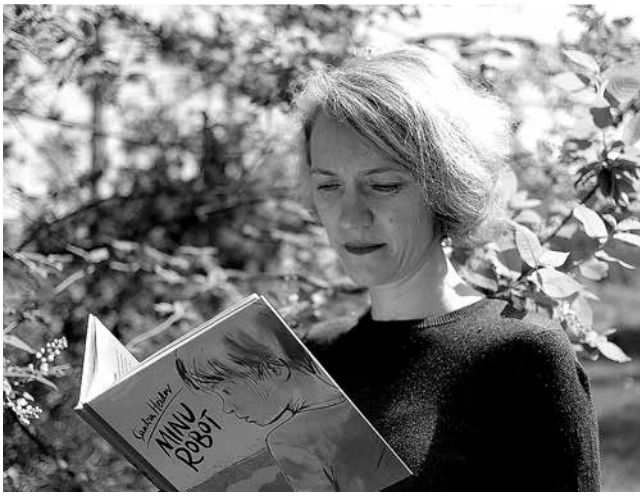
The book is filled with love. At a very young age, Lydia wishes to help her father with his difficult job as a newspaper editor. As a young woman, she teaches her Estonian pupils with love, sharing both knowledge and joy that is so great it inspires her to sing. As time goes by, she becomes a full-fledged adult and the best mother her two daughters could ever ask for – smiling, always willing to play, and glowing. You cannot love your native land if you do not love your family.

Lydia isn't a feminist work, though it is a nice female-centric book that should also be suitable for boys. It is a book for all ages.

Kaldmaa has composed a fantastic introduction to one piece of Estonian culture. It is writing that invites one to question and dig deeper, hopefully on both sides of the borders of Estonian language and culture. The ability to cross divides is stressed through Lydia's life as well. Koidula and Jannsen were the first to begin forging cultural ties between kindred Estonia and Finland, which isn't overlooked in Lydia.

The book's design also deserves special mention. Jaan Rõõmus achieved a fantastic outcome with a modest palette of just red and blue. A newspaper headline, the copied page of an old poetry book in unusual type, and many more cultural treasures embedded in the illustrations make the story of Lydia and her native country more visible. *Lydia* concludes with Koidula's portrait on the front of the 100-kroon banknote. Thanks to these design elements, and especially Kaldmaa's fascinating style of writing, we realize that Koidula, Estonia, and poetry are all part of a greater cosmic world.

LOONE OTS (b. 1965) is an Estonian writer.



SANDRA HEIDOV · PHOTO FROM ARCHIVE

SANDRA HEIDOV
MINU ROBOT
(MY ROBOT)
Illustrations by Toomas Pääsuke
Varrak 2021, 64 pp.
ISBN 9789985351024

Sandra Heidov's eye for what really matters in everyday life was apparent right from her debut work, *Lapsed ja natuke vanemad* (Kids and Kind-Of-Grown-Ups), which contains jolly stories about the relationships between children and their parents. Her second children's book, *Minu robot* (My Robot), is significantly deeper, more sensitive, and layered, and offers an honest and true glimpse into a child's heart and mind.

Robin, the book's primary-school protagonist, has built himself a robot and placed it on his desk. The boy wishes the robot would always be around whenever he needs to talk. His mom, dad, and older brother are always so busy with their own activities, which usually don't include him, so it's nice to have someone who's always with you and there for support. The robot always speaks in the same calm tone, and is never sad or overly cheerful either. Robin likes it that way because it means he can always count on his companion. The robot comforts him when he's afraid to enter his dark bedroom at night, encourages him when he messes up during piano practice, and gives advice on how to make sure his dad takes him along to basketball practice.

Robin's robot helps him make sense of the world and face the challenges life rolls in front of him. The robot is the only one he's able to reveal his deepest fears to and tell his most secret hopes and dreams without fearing reproach or embarrassment. In its company, he doesn't need to be smarter, bolder, bigger, a more suitable playmate for his brother, or meet his parents' expectations. Only with the robot can he truly be himself: someone who doesn't know everything, has doubts, is still finding out who he is, and someone who must find a path that, first and foremost, works for him.

Robin keeps the robot a secret from his family and friends. The boy reckons that everyone else must have their own totally unique robots, too.

JAANIKA PALM (b. 1973) is a researcher at the Estonian Children's Literature Center.

JAANUS VAIKSOO
KING #41
(SHOE #41)
Ärkel 2022, 190 pp
ISBN 9789949727261

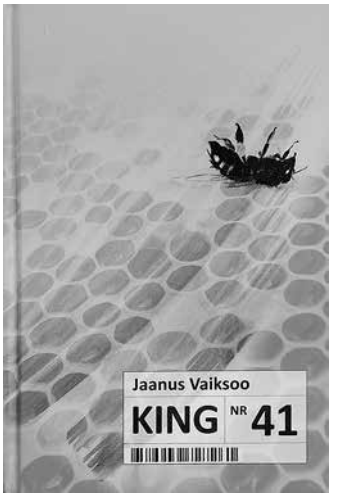
Shoe #41 by Jaanus Vaiksoo is a new addition to the series that follows the adventures of 12-year-old Paul. As the kids spend their summer in the country-house of their friend Hugo Bachman and his fiancé Katja, they start to investigate the curious case of poisoned bees in the village. Paul's attention to detail when searching for clues, his skill of deduction, help from the villagers and his friends, are all instrumental in solving the case and bringing the perpetrator to justice.

The author seamlessly weaves a touching side-plot that introduces young readers to the dark history of World War II. The kids find a series of letters in an abandoned farm in the village. Written by a boy their age deported to Siberia and addressed to his friend back home, these letters give insight into the everyday life of children affected by the Soviet regime of terror. Vaiksoo has managed to write about this painful part of Estonian history in a manner that is not too heavy for a young reader but also does not trivialize the events that affected many people. This valuable side-plot gives a needed depth to the mostly humorous events depicted in the book and provides the most emotional scenes of the story.

As the latest edition to the series that concentrates on the same set of characters as those before, the story does not necessarily require the reader to be familiar with previous books. However, one would definitely understand the connection between the characters and the friendship dynamics of the younger and the older characters better by reading the previous books. A humorous side-character worth a mention, is the beloved family dog Valter whose inner monologue about the confusing behavior of humans is a real treat to readers.

All in all, *Shoe #41* provides an enjoyable reading experience to young reader, which is all together interesting and touching, educational and entertaining.

KADRI NAANU (b. 1987) has a Master's degree in Comparative Literature from the University of Tartu. She works in the Estonian Children's Literature Centre as a communications manager.



JAANUS VAIKSOO · PHOTO BY EIKE ÜLESOO

ANTI SAAR · PHOTO BY DMITRI KOTJUH

ANTI SAAR
KUIDAS MINUST EI SAANUD KIRJANIKKU
(HOW I DIDN'T BECOME A WRITER)
Kolm Elu 2021, 112 pp.
ISBN 9789916404737

Anti Saar, one of the most interesting Estonian authors today, earned the admiration of readers and critics alike with his debut children's book, *Kuidas meil asjad käivad* (The Way Things Are With Us, 2013). Each of his subsequent works, be it prose or poetry, has been highly anticipated by young readers wondering what Saar has cooked up this time.

His latest book is a collection of ten short stories tied together by a common cast of characters. The protagonist is an 11-year-old boy named Juhan, Juks for short, who is an avid writer. No matter whether it's a haiku, a tale of adventure, a travelogue, a newspaper article, an aphorism, or a sports story, Juks is equally fascinated by every genre. But unfortunately, he's unable to finish a single piece. He can attempt any different style or genre any way he pleases but is still doomed to fail. On one occasion Juks's neighbor doesn't allow him to publish the article he's working on and threatens to use it for kindling; another time, his teacher pulls the brakes on his burst of inspiration; and on a third, he can't seem to pull off worthy illustrations for his story. Is it possible to become a writer even if you only write unfinished works? Luckily, Juks's best friend Robi comes to the rescue: he explains what metafiction is, and the non-writer suddenly transforms into a writer.

The merits of Saar's collection include his familiar unexpected and well-intentioned humor, and brisk and thrilling plots and characters that are conveyed through vivid details. The protagonist's direct, genuine inner dialogue offers readers the opportunity to draw parallels to their own lives and activities. Juks's attitude towards his flops is mild and understanding, reminding the reader not to treat their own blunders with too much criticism or reproach. Mistakes are simply curves on the road to progress.

JAANIKA PALM (b. 1973) is a researcher at the Estonian Children's Literature Center.

INDREK KOFF
KUHU LAPSED SAID
(WHERE 'd THE KIDS GO?)
Illustrated by Elina Sildre
Härra Tee & Proua Kohvi, Tallinn 2021, 70 pp.
ISBN 9789916964927

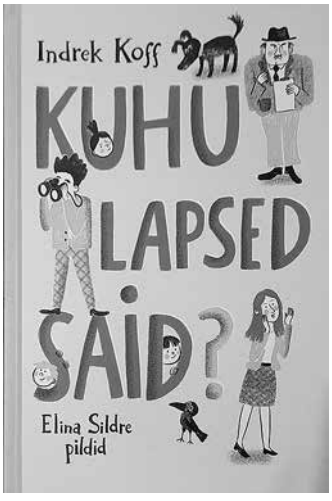
Over the years, writer and translator Indrek Koff has penned several fantastic children's stories, including *Enne kooli* (Before School), *Kui ma oleksin vanaisa* (If I Were a Grandpa), *Kirju koer* (The Multicolored Dog), and many more. Last year, he published *Kuhu lapsed said* (Where'd the Kids Go?) – a story in verse. It is Koff's first work of children's poetry and, an all-around wonderful success.

In 2021, there were 115 new children's works published in Estonia: 110 of prose and just five collections of poetry! Koff's exceptional work did provide some relief. The author has a flair for rhyme and the story, told through a prism of silliness, features a cast of colorful characters. *Where'd the Kids Go*? is about a happy little village where, one day, the children become fed up with all the rules and restrictions that adults constantly lay upon them and decide to leave. The grown-ups grow sad after their homes are drained of the youngest, most spirited members. Luckily, there's also a cheerful couple living in the village: little Mr. Kalju and stout Mrs. Sirel, the absolute love of his life. The two always delight in each other's company and only have eyes for their darling: "*The two of them live there together, / happy and lively in any weather*."

When summer rolls around, Mr. Kalju and Mrs. Sirel construct an incredibly long clay slide in their garden, then proceed to laugh and enjoy: "*There's a portly lady in a wrestling singlet / and a little old man with a laugh that tinkles*."

The kids hear the fun and laughter from afar and can't resist returning home to frolic and play. It was as easy as that: an old couple's love for each other saved the day and brought back all the children, filling the village with joy once again. The simple adage "Love conquers all!" shines plainly through Koff's fluid and gleeful poems, reaching kids and their parents alike. Elina Sildre's exuberant illustrations only add more color and humor to the mix.

JAANUS VAIKSOO (b. 1967) is an Estonian writer and literary scholar.



INDREK KOFF · PHOTO BY DMITRI KOTJUH

Tiny Books on Profound Topics

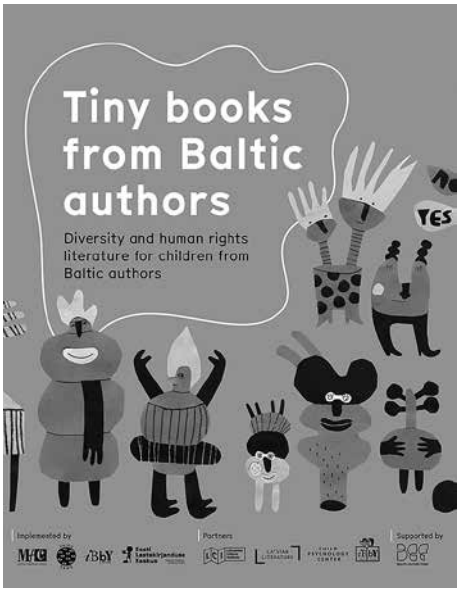
by Ulla Saar

Children's writers and illustrators from the Baltic states recently created 18 unique "tiny books" aimed at readers aged 6 to 10 and cover an array of human-rights topics. Each foldable work in the Tiny Books from Baltic Authors project is free to download and print at home.

Children's literature centers and organizations in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania kicked off the project in 2021 with the goal of developing cooperation between Baltic authors and artists and promoting the region's professional literature abroad. Six writers and six illustrators from each country took part.

The works cover complex human-rights topics such as equality, cultural diversity, freedom of speech, and discrimination against elderly persons. Readers are invited to give deeper thought to the issues and thus overcome any preconceived notions. The Tiny Books from Baltic Authors team believes that childhood is the ideal time to introduce and address such topics, which will result in a cohesive and inclusive society. Reading and discussing the works should foster empathy both at home and elsewhere.

To ensure the tiny books are accessible to the largest possible audience and dodge any linguistic barriers, the books have been released in all three Baltic languages as well as German, English, Italian, French, Spanish, Dutch, Russian, Polish, Ukrainian, and Luxemburgish. Three are even available in Korean translation and there are plans to further expand the list of languages. The books can be downloaded at no charge or read electronically if preferred at www.tinybooks.ee and are accompanied by methodological teaching materials and supplemental questions to encourage reading and speaking about the important topics with young persons. Meant for parents and



LITHUANIAN ILLUSTRATOR AUŠRA KIUDULAITĖ DESIGNED THE TINY BOOKS POSTER · PROVIDED BY THE ESTONIAN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE CENTER

THE TINY BOOKS EXHIBITION AT THE 2022 BOLOGNA CHILDREN'S BOOK FAIR · PHOTO BY JUSTINAS VANCEVIČIUS

educators, these materials were composed by child psychologists, children's literature critics, and children's literature promoters.

The project team would like the Tiny Books to be read, shared, and used as tools in teaching and workshops around the world. "We hope the books will also catch foreign publishers' attention and boost interest in translating from the Estonian, Latvian, and Lithuanian languages," commented Justinas Vancevičius, co-founder of the Lithuanian organization Vaikų žemė (Children's World) and one of the project's initiators.

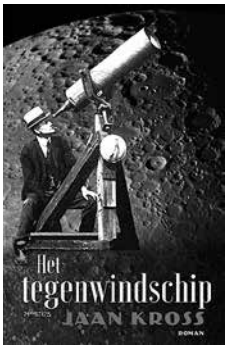
So far, Tiny Books from Baltic Authors has been introduced with discussions and workshops at the Head Read literary festival in Tallinn and book fairs in Vilnius, Bologna, and London. Additionally, the compact works have been added to all three countries' national reading curricula and have been the topic of local library events.

ULLA SAAR (b. 1975) is an Estonian illustrator and graphic artist.

Selected Translations

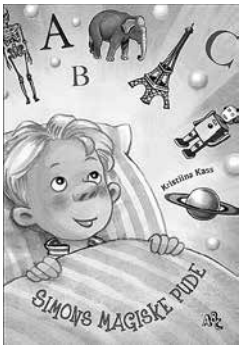
Croatian

INDREK KOFF
Palavikulilled
Cvjetovi groznice
Translated by Boris Vidović
Published by Marko Radeljić, 2022
36 pp.



Dutch

JAAN KROSS
Vastutuulelaev: Bernhard Schmidti roman
Het tegenwindschip
Translated by Frans van Nes
Published by Prometheus, 2022
384 pp.

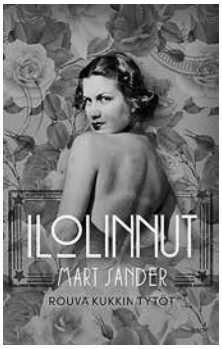


Danish

KRISTIINA KASS
Samueli võlupadi
Simons magiske pude
Translated by Birgita Bonde Hansen
ABC Forlag, 2022
156 pp.

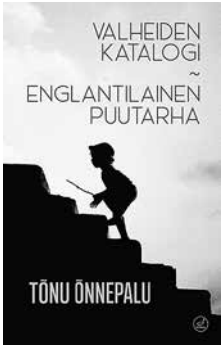
English

JAAN KROSS
Kolme katku vahel III
A Book of Falsehoods. Between Three Plagues III
Translated by Merike Lepasaar Beecher
Published by MacLehose Press, 2022
516 pp.



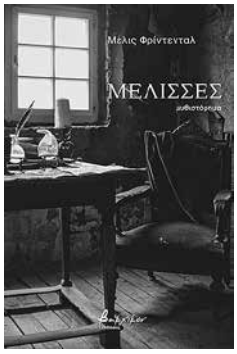
Finnish

MART SANDER
Litsid
Ilolinnut
Translated by Kaisu Lahikainen
Published by WSOY, 2022
396 pp



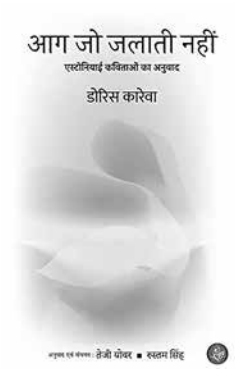
TÕNU ÕNNEPALU
Valede kataloog. Inglise aed
Valheiden katalogi ~ Englantilainen puutarha
Translated by Jouko Väisanen
Published by Kirjokansi, 2022
342 pp

A. H. TAMMSAARE
Kõrboja peremees
Korpiojan isäntä
Translated by Juhani Salokannel
Published by Aviador, 2022
179 pp.



Greek

MEELIS FRIEDENTHAL
Mesilased
Μέλισσες
Translated by Απόστολος Θηβαίος
Published by Vakxikon, 2022
303 pp.



Hindi

DORIS KAREVA
Tuli, mis ei põleta
AAG JO JALTI NAHIN
Translated by Rustam Singh, Teji Grover
Published by Rajkamal Prakashan, 2022
143 pp.

Japanese

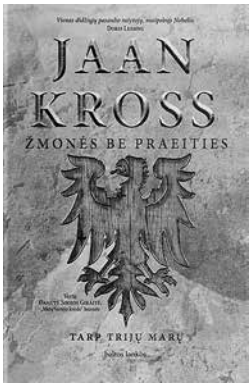
MEHIS HEINSAAR
Liblikmees ja teisi jutte
蝶男：エストニア短編小説集
(Translated from English)
Translated by Kazue Daikoku
Published by Happa-no-Kofu, 2022
104 pp.

Polish

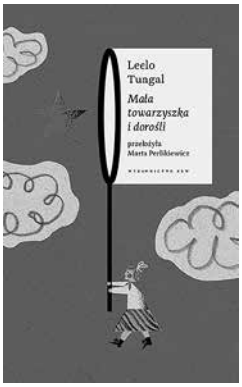
PAAVO MATSIN
Gogoli disko
Gogolowe disco
Translated by Anna Michalczuk-Podlecki
Published by Wydawnictwo Marpess, 2022
180 pp.

Lithuanian

JOONAS SILDRE
Kahe heli vahel. Graafiline romaan Arvo Pärdist
Tarp dviejų garsų
Translated by Viltarė Mickevičienė (Urbaitė)
Published by Aukso žuvys, 2022
223 pp.

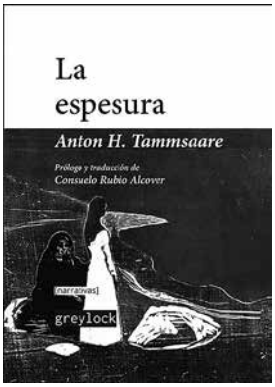


JAAN KROSS
Kolme katku vahel III
Žmonės be praeities. Tarp trijų marų
Translated by Danutė Sirijos Giraitė
Published by Baltos Lankos, 2022
448 pp.



Polish

LEELO TUNGAL
Seltsimees laps ja suured inimesed
Mała towarzyszka i dorośli
Translated by Marta Perlikiewicz
Published by Wydawnictwo Kolegium Europy Wschodniej, 2022
244 pp.



Spanish

A. H. TAMMSAARE
Kõrboja peremees
La espesura
Translated by Consuelo Rubio Alcover
Published by Greylock, 2022
344 pp.

Ukrainian

PIRET RAUD
Natuke napakad lood
Трохи дивакуваті історії
Translated by Katja Novak
Published by Tänapäev, 2022
96 pp.

PHOTO BY EGOR VIKHREV

I wondder houw me psicologicl self loooks

like too othesr coz i hav a feellin

that wen I speek my jumbbledytongeu

thers moar noize than i mean to.

Im suur peepl dink im somkind oof

an jibbberishh man; well its not not tru.

I m notting, im tresh, A nobodi.

i want t be fog adn that me carachtrs

heart wuld be lik Mont Fujji in thatt foog.

I dnt know heuw psyckoloogcl it woould

bee bot me hert woud appear frm de fogh

on sam cleer day. I can feeel my sternght

Reising up to itt: I aalmost love mself fyr

dat imeeginarious imaj.

TÕNIS VILU
FROM *AWRYVILLE* (2018)
TRANSLATED BY TÕNIS VILU

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