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The Borders Within and Around us

Borders, no matter where they stand, are sites of transition from one side to another or vice-versa. They are cradles of change. Change in life is interesting, but is that always a good thing? It's one way to curse an enemy: may you live in interesting times! But can a life in interesting times also hold new and better opportunities?

*The world changed drastically in the early 1990s and one author who masterfully captured the moment in writing was Tõnu Õnnepalu. His widely translated novel, *Border State*, describes the changing human landscape and the person within it. Thirty years and dozens of translations later, Õnnepalu's book—written under the pseudonym Emil Tode—is still a fascinating read and provides ample material for study and interpretation.*

In an interview with ELM, Õnnepalu remarks: "The fact that East and West suddenly ceased to exist as competing systems changed the whole world order. It also changed the nature of the West, its ideas, its morals, everything. It changed the world's system; a change that has in no way ended (if it ever will). We've arrived at a new phase that's nearly a mirror image of the first. Everything is backward, ominous, hopeless, and chaotic. But I suppose that means it's

actually hopeful, too, and something new will emerge from the changes. Only it's impossible to see what that is just yet."

*It is no doubt that the perpetuity of inundating change keeps *Border State* topical today. Likewise, change is inevitably tied to borders, both national and those that people draw within their own minds and morals.*

*Analyzing Õnnepalu's novel, Joonas Hellerma writes: "Indeed, the concepts of 'border state', and of any 'border' in particular, are important metaphors in the book that lose no significance in Õnnepalu's later works. The author's idea of a border strays somewhat from its classical semiotic treatment in which a border is something productive that generates semiosis between opposing sides. This idea is also present in *Border State*, though there's also something original to how Õnnepalu presents it: when standing at a border, one is simultaneously invisible."*

*Raili Marling summarizes the *Border State* phenomenon as such: "Õnnepalu's novel allows us to relive and re-feel the transition period, with its unease about belonging and exclusion. At the same time it remains scathingly relevant. Õnnepalu touches a social nerve and allows us to feel backward*

into the past and, perhaps, to better imagine our shared present.”

Estonian children’s author Kairi Look is a border-walker as well, treading the limits of multiple languages as she writes original Estonian literature (for adult readers as well) and translates from Dutch. Kairi Look sees herself as someone who constantly crosses lines, cherishes freedom and seeks a bright tomorrow while shaping experiences into the written word.

Surprises are all but uncommon on borders. Gunnar Neeme (1918–2005), who lived most of his life in Australia, wrote an Estonian-language manuscript titled Windsure that was published just this year. Though Neeme was an internationally recognized artist, he also published two collections of poetry in Estonian, three in English, and penned a few plays. In his review, Janika Kronberg writes that Windsure is perhaps the surprise of the year in Estonian literature.

“Neeme fought for Estonia’s freedom in the Second World War while wearing a foreign uniform, just as many of his compatriots were forced to do. His stories contain the voice of a generation that was patriotic but betrayed and exiled.”

The limits of literature are tested by the novel-writing competition organized by the Estonian Writers’ Union, which is a primordial soup of new authors and trends. This year, the author of the winning manuscript, Vareda, is none other than Estonian Member of

the European Parliament Sven Mikser and, like Border State, it is set in the tumult of the early 90s.

Is Estonia still a border state today? Thirty years and a depthless pool of efforts later? Rein Raud, the chair of this year’s competition jury, believes it certainly is—for why else would he be asked time and again what it means to be Estonian? As Raud puts it: “I can’t imagine anyone in distant Asia or South America asking an English writer what it means to be English. In that sense, we’re most definitely still a border state.”

Likewise, Tiit Aleksejev, head of the Estonian Writers’ Union, contemplates whether Estonia remains a border state and will continue to be one in the future. “‘Border’ sometimes means conflict, other times communication, and often both simultaneously. Destructive experience and enriching experience, depending on inner strength and the field lines of the era.”

ANNIKA A. KOPPEL /
photo Peeter Langovits



THE HEADREAD LITERARY FESTIVAL BROUGHT A FULL HOUSE

by Mari Rebane

The HeadRead Literary Festival, held annually during the last week of May, served as a venue for 90 writers, literary figures, and musicians, including nearly 40 non-Estonian guests. About 4,500 people traversed through the Estonian Writers' House over the five-day festival—leading to a full auditorium that swelled beyond capacity for the conversation between Mikhail Shishkin and Harri Tiido. There were terrifically large audiences at events held elsewhere around Tallinn as well: the Estonian Children's Literature Center, Ait Café, Kellertheater, the Tallinn Central Library, and Kuku Club.

The authors covered a plethora of topics during the festival discussions. Notable non-Estonian guest authors included Jussi Adler-Olsen, a popular Danish crime writer; Kristina Sabaliuskaitė, a Lithuanian writer and art historian; Anthony Horowitz, a British author and screenwriter; and Elin Cullhed, a Swedish novelist who has written about the life of Sylvia Plath. Younger audiences were treated to events by Romana Romyshyn and Andri Lessiv, a Ukrainian artist duo; Janne Teller, a Danish youth author; and psychologist and children's author Jenny Jägerfeld, whose works address the balance

The auditorium was filled beyond capacity for the discussion between **MIKHAIL SHISHKIN** and **HARRI TIIDO** / photo Dmitri Kotjuh



between societal expectations and remaining oneself.

The HeadRead Festival also offered a diverse overview of contemporary Estonian literature. Taking the stage were students of Collegium Educationis Revaliae (Old Town Educational College), members of the Youth Section of the Estonian Writers' Union, and budding school-aged

Estonian authors. Conversations were held between author-pairs such as Anti Saar and Kadri-Ann Sumera, and Eero Epner and Maarja Undusk, and local writers performing at the Estonian Children's Literature Center included Liis Sein, Juhan Voolaid, Kadri Kiho, and Tiina Laanem. While panel discussions on graphic novels and bibliomania were held at



the Tallinn Central Library. The Nice Poetry Vol. 2 event brought young female poets to the stage, poetry cafés were opened in Tallinn's Old Town, and the annual Poetry Mass at St. Nicholas's Church was dedicated to the late translator and cultural mediator Eha Vain.

Eleven of this year's HeadRead discussions can be watched on the ERR Jupiter platform¹, and additional information about the festival can be found at headread.ee. The 2024 festival is scheduled for May 29, 2024, through June 2, 2024.

SVEN MIKSER'S VAREDA WINS THE 2023 ESTONIAN NOVEL-WRITING COMPETITION

by EWU

The winners of the Estonian Writers' Union's 2023 Novel-Writing Competition were announced at the Estonian Writers' House on June 16. **Sven Mikser won first place and the prize for Best Language and Style**, sponsored by the Estonian Language Institute and the Estonian Language Foundation, with his manuscript *Vareda*.



¹ <https://jupiter.err.ee/1608998705/kirjanduse-aeg-2023>

The other prizes were as follows:

2nd place:

Hannes Parmo, *Beta*

3rd place:

Piret Jaaks, *Daughters of the Sky*

Jaan Tõnisson Prize,

sponsored by the Postimees Fund:

Kaur Riismaa, *Before Sin and Robots*

Tallinn City Prize:

An Ode to Death (the author wished to remain anonymous)

Special Mention:

Anete Kruusmägi, *The Last Sunrise*

Meelis Ivanov, *Collapse*

Anonymized manuscripts were evaluated by a jury consisting of Rein Raud, Heidi Aadma, Reeli Reinaus, Karl-Martin Sinijärv, Igor Kotjuh, and Tiit Alekseejev.

Authors of works awarded at the Writers' Union's 2023 Novel-Writing Competition: Hannes Parmo, Anete Kruusmägi, Sven Mikser, Kaur Riismaa, and Piret Jaaks / photo Kris Moor



Who Could Hold all the World's Beauty?

by Joonas Hellerna

The reception of Emil Tode's Border State (1993) was shaped by multiple elements that were novel to Estonian literature of the time, including a homosexual motif and the book's laconic, poetic, and confessional literary style.

Episodic, introspective novels told from a first-person perspective constitute the chief stylistic method of Tõnu Õnnepalu (for example, with the exceptions of *Princess*, 1997 and *Mandala*, 2012). The shared basis for this is Õnnepalu's understanding of the historical end of great epic novels, as a result of which it is possible for an author to seek their literary voice and invent an autobiographical narrator. Thus, Õnnepalu's main medium has been the personal diary format, though the protagonist is always a fictional character, a literary speaker who shouldn't be totally equated to the author himself. Õnnepalu has emphasized this distinction with his use of various pseudonyms: Emil Tode is the name used for *Border State*, and Anton Nigov for his 2002 novel *Exercises*.

Border State was Õnnepalu's debut novel. Its title has always played a key role in interpreting the text, being primarily about an Eastern European's migration to the West, to Paris, to the Free World, which sharply illuminates the new historical situation of the early

1990s. The mutually alienating meeting of Eastern and Western Europe, and the contrast between the two. Indeed, the concepts of a 'border state', and particularly of any 'border', are important metaphors in the book that lose no significance in Õnnepalu's later works. The author's idea of a border strays somewhat from its classical semiotic treatment, in which a border is something productive that generates semiosis between opposing sides. This notion isn't missing from *Border State*, though there's also something original to Õnnepalu's presentation: one standing at a border is simultaneously invisible. They not only connect or mediate the opposing sides but, in a way, also transcend and negate them. In doing so, the individual remains an unseen and even ghostly entity between worlds. The specter is unable to truly fit into a single predefined group or reality, and turns out to be *unadapted*; an *outcast*. However, this is compensated for by a uniquely perceptive fate that comes along with the position: one sees more when standing upon a border, with views to both sides. This, I might add, doesn't only apply in a geopolitical sense, meaning in views of the East and the West. Ultimately, the person sees an array of times: the modern, where vehicles zoom onto a highway, and the



pre-modern, 'thousand-year' world that is symbolized in the novel by a sunny field and the figure of a woman bowing down before it. Standing on a border, it is possible to see a number of great mental currents all at once: technological civilization and the progressiveness that follows, and on the other side the old, traditional world of fields and lush nature. Seeing these *times* also makes Õnnepalu a fascinating observer of history, though it does often lead him to grim and resigned conclusions regarding the health of humanism. He isn't utterly enchanted by modern and progressive ideals, nor by romantic and backward reactions, though he naturally acknowledges their impact on, and grasp over, people.

Breaking Self-Colonization

In addition to its unique border conception, *Border State* possesses an intriguing and significant connection to the efforts of the early 20th-century literary group Noor-Eesti (Young Estonia), for which Paris, as a hub of literature and art, played the role of a cosmopolitan metropole.¹ One could even go so far as to say that the narrator of Tode/Õnnepalu's novel fulfills and completes Noor-Eesti's endeavor. In that sense, he is the herald of a new stage, a new era.

How so? In *Border State*, the protagonist's partner, host, and patron—a philosophy professor named Franz—dies. The professor preached about Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Foucault, and Derrida, however, the narrator ceases to believe in these things. Whether the professor's mysterious death was due to suicide or foul play is to be determined

by a police investigation; in any case, the event is undoubtedly symbolically charged. Although Franz rails on about socialist ideals, his hypocrisy is revealed when he ends up bent over a newspaper, scanning it for stock prices because he's inherited a portfolio from relatives. Franz was no true revolutionary, Marxist, or believer. In the end, he placed more faith in his stocks than in any lofty ideal. So perishes philosophy. In a sense, it is already a living corpse in the form of Franz. In Tode/Õnnepalu's Paris, "European philosophy" is given a symbolic end—if not for an Eastern European, then at least for an Estonian. However, this means that the Paris of *Border State* does not bring along *self-colonization*: here, no philosophy, teaching, or ideology is taken and exported to immature, behind-the-times Estonia.

Noor-Eesti's European aspirations have since been analyzed in terms of self-colonization; of "catching up" to the West. *Border State* finds its way to Paris, but instead of bowing before the pantheon of philosophers, the narrator finds that the gods no longer deserve to be worshiped. The philosophy professor's death is symbolic, not barbaric: it stands for neither the defiant rejection of Western culture nor its stubborn denial. Simply, the status of the former cultural idol is lost—one that required a gap between the educated and the uneducated, the enlightened and the inferior.

Thus, a certain *individuality* emerges with its own strong historical consciousness, unblinded by the West. It learns no epigenous philosophy, politics, or ideology, but instead perceives its own aliveness and singularity. It is pronouncedly sense-oriented, yearning, and feeling. Still, it isn't archaic or primitive, but educated and self-aware. The new *in-*

¹ The group's ideology can be summarized by a statement by its member Gustav Suits: "Let us remain Estonians, but let us become Europeans, too."

dividuality that surfaces now becomes subject matter for the narrator: *what is it? How should he live?* In what way should he interpret himself? In what form should he exist? His point of departure is standing on a border and the invisibility and ghostliness that comes with it. However, this very territorial ambivalence is the needed condition for those questions to arise, fresh and undisturbed, at all.

The Firstness of Nature

The philosophy professor's death is more like a slave-driver's death, marking the end of a particular slave mentality and the birth of a new, free voice. However, that voice tends to be *searching*, confessional, divulging, struggling with illusions, and pursuing form and sense for its freedom. That voice becomes a unique traveler and truth-seeker.

Border State is certainly a romance, though the narrator's relationship with nature grows to be important and, perhaps, primary to his relationships with humans. Önnepalu's prose and poetry contain an abundance of allusions to an "ecological" worldview and to post-humanism, according to which there is currently a great demand for finding alternatives to a global civilization governed by an economy that is exhausting and transforming the planet. One passage references the classic Estonian poet and prose writer Juhan Liiv (1864–1913):

"[...] *there was a little clearing, or rather a sparse place among the straight pines, covered by thick, level heather, upon which a little autumn sunlight still spilled—there, I always stood still, my feet in the sand, like a pine, thinking: 'The beauty of this world.' [...] 'Oh! I would've wanted to wrap my arms around that clearing, to embrace it, to protect it,*

to shield it with my puny body, just like I wanted to shield you, Angelo, but my arms are so short."²

That little clearing there among the pines, where the protagonist recognizes "the beauty of this world" and feels the need to hold and protect it, is an uncolonized, unsettled, and sacred place that cannot be transformed, divested, sold off, or exploited. This untouched natural place can, metaphorically, be seen as the place of *individuality*; its root and source. The protagonist of *Border State* feels firmer ground for his existence in nature than in human culture or civilization. This ground *awakens* love and care. The subject's connection to the *land* is thereby revealed, a subject freed from the spell of culture and philosophy. Connections to land and the land's firstness are some of the most fascinating threads in Önnepalu's later works, the most tangible of which can be found in his 2019 novel *Acre*.

This topic is not exhausted within the clearing amongst the pines but grows to become almost a leitmotif of *Border State* when, near the beginning of the book, the narrator describes his "ideal landscape": a simple, austere grassy area by the sea, the stalks "bobbing there in the incessant wind". The protagonist muses about how he'd gladly be grass on that meadow, because he realizes that the ancient landscape is filled with much more vitality than man. In this sense, the lush grass is the "champion" of evolution for having lived long before humans and surviving long after: "In yearning to share that plant kingdom, I am actually yearning to become one of the chosen ones; one of

² This and following translations of *Border State* were done by Adam Cullen, not taken from the 2000 edition published by Northwestern University Press.

the strongest.” He sees an eternal material in nature, to which human reality is merely temporary, fleeting.³ Thus, there is nothing distant, different, or threatening about nature. Humans are made from it and interwoven with it. The elementary exploration of nature and turning to it are the true sources of love and humanity.

Hesitant Thinking

The notions in *Border State* that place the vegetative and meteorological ahead of human sophistry are, for the most part, ahead of their time and are presently underway in the current era to phrase the ecological and green worldviews and to theorize about them. In this sense, the philosophy professor’s death can be read as the end of the illusion of bettering the world with abstract and rationally calculated utopias. However, neither life nor the world ends with death: the new *individuality*, freed of enchantment, now turns back to itself. The self-description that ensues is a force that sets Önnepalu’s writing into motion. It is a literary practice that probes, invents, and seeks itself, with *hesitation* at its core (in *Exercises* the author remarks that thinking begins with hesitation). In hesitation and being between two decisions (standing on a border!), a place in which there is no firm ground or clear truth, there is the opportunity for a path to be revealed: one that leads to a *clearing*, to nature and oneself, which is an event in which something holy and untouchable is experienced. Remaining with it, practicing it, protecting it—continues the task of thinking and of freedom. A thematic poem that explores Önnepalu’s think-

ing can be found in his 1988 collection *Ithaca*: “What is This ‘Thinking’ of Mine”: “*It is a child’s sob late in the dark in autumn / mouth hackberry-bloody hands cold / probing potato stalks and the smell of mounds / on a muddy field / Memories help him / find the way home / just as much as the stars, unseen / [...]*” Revealed even in these early poems are an interweaving of thought and perception, thinking being both bodily and physical, and nature’s own action that cannot be divided from corporality. Nature is the manifestation of life’s mystery, from which the human quest for home originates and into which it journeys.

Thus, *Border State* contains many currents and motifs that have not lost their relevancy. The novel was written at a time when people spoke of “the end of history”, and reading it is a chance to travel back into those end-days. By now, we know, of course, that the “end” wasn’t really an end: history continues, and borders are deepening instead of disappearing. *Border State* continues along with it.

Joonas Hellerma (b. 1984) is a presenter and editor for Estonian Public Broadcasting and the host of the weekly cultural talk show *Plekktrum* (*Din Trum*) on ETV2. He studied Film and Video at Tallinn University and has a master’s in Philosophy at the same university.

A longer version of this article was originally published in the weekly cultural newspaper, Sirp (September 23, 2022).

³ Interesting variations of this notion appear throughout Önnepalu’s works, one of the most striking being in *Flanders Diary* (2008).

photo Andres Tali



Tõnu Õnnepalu: A Writer is a Saboteur, a Spy, a Dubious Character

by Maia Tammjärv

*Thirty years have passed since the release of *Border State*, a novel by Tõnu Õnnepalu (b. 1962) that was published under the pseudonym Emil Tode and has become one of the most-translated works of Estonian literature. To mark the occasion, we spoke to the author about the unattainable past, borders that can and cannot be crossed, East and West, and the strands connecting nature and culture.*

Border State was published 30 years ago. Although you wrote three poetry collections before it, the novel is what brought you fame (I counted 19 languages into which it's been fully translated to date¹). What did the success bring?

For some reason, people believe that success is something to be desired and envied. Sure, it brings experiences that otherwise may never have been had (and here I mean painful, traumatic, but perhaps also thereby deep encounters), and given that experiences are a writer's sole capital, it naturally has value as well. There are the superficial and material aspects as well. Those translations allowed me to survive the poorest and most meager years of Estonia's economic transition in the 1990s

with relative ease—a time when the country had zero money for literature. I was able to keep writing.

In a sense, it was that part of the book's success—all the trips abroad as a writer, as an author—that pushed me onto the path. Who knows, maybe I'd have gone into an entirely different field otherwise. But I can't even say that for certain. Anyone who's had one sip of the drug, who's experienced the unique state into which writing elevates you—being far outside of yourself while simultaneously very close to yourself—can they ever settle for an “ordinary life” again? I'm afraid the temptation to try it again is too great.

Is that fortune? Fortune feels like a rather meaningless category when talking about creative activity... But maybe that's precisely why it is important! In any case, it took years and years for me to understand that writing *can* be my fortune, my special little way of existing in this world. Success was suffering, compulsion, and obligation above all. Actually, I had no idea how to move on from that for a while. That's all in the distant past now, luckily. I often think back on it as if it were another life lived by someone else—someone who, in a strange way, I myself was.

¹ <https://sisu.ut.ee/ewod/oe/onnepalu/prose>

TÕNU ÕNNEPALU says that
one can't understand humankind
without understanding themselves /
photo Triin Maasik



In a recent interview, you implied that the reason for *Border State*'s wider dissemination might be a certain 90s exoticism of the East. But that can't be the only reason, as translations were also published later.

I think there's no point analyzing how that book, and others of mine, have done; in scrutinizing their path to readers. A book is merely a reflection of a person's life and there's always something inexplicable in its "fate". Some do well, even though they're a shapeless form from which no one expects anything. Others have every imaginable advantage and fail at everything in life. Why? How? There are so many components to the solution, one of which is time and its zeitgeist. Though trying to somehow capture the zeitgeist is futile, of course. However, one tries to define a phenomenon, it is already the zeitgeist of the past. We grope our way blindly into the future, ignorant. It may be possible to capture something that touches others as we attempt to record it in writing; something that reveals to them their own experience that hasn't a name, that cannot really be spoken yet.

Writing has been an extremely personal process for me from the very beginning; an attempt to speak about that which cannot really be spoken about, though it's the only thing you want to discuss. I've managed to pull it off on occasion, more or less, and those have been the high points of my life, though the unutterable has mostly remained unutterable and so I don't regard my career as all too successful. Let's say it's a 98% failure rate. But I'm not saying that two percent is insignificant. It's

a rather respectable effectivity. All in all, I'm content with my failure.

As *Border State* was the first book you published under a pseudonym (which I'm assuming wasn't, in practice, with the intent to hide your identity?), one could, at face value, possibly conclude that you anticipated a different type of reception or impact.

It was meant to hide my identity. And it worked, at first. I didn't want people to know who was behind the book when it was released. As I'd already written and published a few things, I wanted to avoid the connection. I wasn't thinking about those things so clearly back then, of course; the pseudonym and everything was more of an instinctual decision. There were also practical personal considerations, of course—fear over what the reception of that type of book would be. And I suppose it *was* rather borderline (as with all my books), splitting the audience in two as if foretelling the overall division that we've come to today.

For me, personally, writing *Border State* in Paris was a kind of rebirth; my birth as a writer, though that sounds too ceremonious. But it was an existential change, I'd even say a physiological sensation, a bodily experience. Writing is a bodily activity, and it changes the body. I can't really explain how. And it could well have been fantasy, but that's what I felt then and still feel now. I suppose I wanted to give that new body a new name. Later, I realized that names are somewhat trivial, and no name can be given to such an experience of bodily rejuvenation, anyway. The author's name is the most fictional element of any book. It's total fabrication! That person doesn't exist.

Border State has been labelled, among other things, “Estonia’s first gay novel”. At the same time, others have argued that the protagonist is androgynous, genderless.² What feelings does that engender in the author—the fact that, to this day, 30 years later, there are still articles, dissertations, and conference lectures that aim to crack some kind of a secret, some truth?

That’s no longer my present. A book becomes present again in the reader. That is where the book I once wrote lives its new lives, over which I myself have no power and about which I never really get to know anything. Some occasional feedback or commentary may be interesting, because it reveals something about the person who read the book. That’s when I get to experience the “ah-ha!” moment, to be amazed that it can be interpreted that way, too.

Writing a book is a lonely act, but publishing it is an extremely social act that, in retrospect, makes the writing partly social as well. Writing is speaking with the Unknown. On the one hand, it gives you courage (the Unknown can’t argue back), but on the other, it requires courage (the Unknown can always turn your words against you, make them ridiculous, obliterate them). Writing is a leap into the unknown.

The 90s were a historical breaking point, I guess you could say, meaning a moment when there was a great amount of unknown, a lot of opportunities, and a moment of immense freedom. At such a point, it’s possible to say things that would be hard, if not impossible, at other times. That perhaps gives what is

said a special value of truth. It’s just a hypothesis, of course. The 90s in Eastern Europe was a fresh, child-like time. There was a lot of idiocy and illusions, but also courage. Or was it really courage? When the old system ceased to exist, then a new one had to be invented whether you wanted to or not.

Just from the title itself, the conflict between East and West in *Border State* won’t let me go. The tension hasn’t dissolved even today. Is it at all possible to get away from that, and how?

The experience of conflict between East and West is precisely what I was trying to get off my chest! It was extremely personal, painful, and fascinating. The thing was simple: “we” here in the “East” stepped out of an old system and into a new one. We had to rethink everything, we encountered a different world and different people in the sense that they really did lead very different lives with different problems and amidst different convictions. In short, we inevitably had to change, relearn, and understand what was going on. But the West itself seemingly didn’t have to change, or rather people in the West didn’t realize that the changes affected them as well. People tend to continue living in the world they’re used to occupying, even when that world is disappearing around them.

The fact that East and West suddenly ceased to exist as competing systems changed the whole world order. It also changed the nature of the West, its ideas, its morals, everything. It changed the world’s system; a change that’s in no way ended (if it ever will). We’ve arrived at a new phase that’s nearly a mirror image

² The Estonian language is non-gendered, allowing for ample ambiguity. – Translator

of the first. Everything is backward, ominous, hopeless, chaotic. But I suppose that means it's actually hopeful, too, and something new will emerge from the changes. Only it's impossible to see what that is just yet.

Of course, I'm simply thirty years older now. When you're thirty years old, the world that is coming (and it's always coming—the world is an incessant comer) is very much your own. You yourself are still that coming... And then, one day, you realize that your paths have diverged. You're still going your own way while the world is heading elsewhere. At the same time, I'm not sure that fundamental understanding ever changes over the course of our lifetime. We collect experiences that confirm it, phrases and notions that express it, but our attitude towards the world doesn't change. Not our understanding nor lack of it. Perhaps the latter is even more defining. Literature comes more from a lack of understanding, being an attempt to understand. Loved ones are those with whom we share a common lack of understanding.

In your novel *Salary: A Winter Diary* (2021), you examined, among other things, Estonian literature and the status of Estonian writers, and it seems you hold a certain antipathy: “The Estonian writer is one type of the living dead. [...] I would like to become a writer, not an Estonian writer.”

A writer is also a saboteur, a spy, a dubious character. I've always simply searched literature for that, which I need, and I've looked for it everywhere I can without differentiating whether it's Estonian literature or any other. Naturally, that which is written right here and now

in the same language that I speak is something special, something very intimate, by which I mean to say it *might* have what I'm looking for, but usually not!

For me, there are very high stakes at play in literature. Nationality, locality, temporality, they're all just material and technique in writing. It actually speaks of something else. Something that matters more. And interestingly, I've noticed—take with the translations of my own books—that people tend to find something “else” that matters to them even where they shouldn't be expected to find it. Their experience in life should be much different than my own, but that doesn't count. Something else does.

I recently read Icelandic author Andri Snær Magnason's *On Time and Water* (2019) and was fascinated by how we're accustomed to speaking about nature with an economic vocabulary. In other words, nature has to be of some benefit (say, for tourism), as if it lacks its own value. You have a degree in biology and are simultaneously a writer. Do you think it might be the same with culture and literature?

Nature is of no benefit overall, of course. It simply exists and we don't know why, because we ourselves are also a part of its existence, just like everything we make: books, cars, bombs, artificial intelligence—nothing exists outside of nature. We don't fully know why we write literature, either. We simply do, perhaps because we're used to doing it. But it's certainly not wrong to speak about benefit—I read books only because they're of some benefit to me. I use them to look for and find some kind

of help, understanding, entertainment, whatever!

It's the same with nature. Try as we may, it's impossible for us to treat it entirely selflessly. Every tiny fish, every little plant, is trying to survive here just like every one of us. No matter what, the cost of that survival is a number of other lives. Environmental protection can be nothing other than humankind's own protection. And that's what it is: an attempt to preserve the world in the way that our species, and perhaps our civilization, can continue existing here in the precious way and with the values to which we're accustomed (like love for one's fellow man, helping others, human rights, etc.). We can't simply protect abstract nature—we're no gods.

All in all, we're not so wise and powerful to truly steer the fate of this world and our own species. Time and again, we act indiscriminately, experimenting, probing, trying to understand and never achieving understanding. Literature's role in this "ecosystem" might be the acknowledgement of our nonunderstanding; bringing us back down to earth when the waves of self-admiration and omnipotence (or triviality and unimportance) are crashing down upon us. Literature can remind us that we're quite stupid, even though we're amazingly smart. Quite evil, even though we're sometimes amazingly good.

What can we expect from the near future in light of all this? What's going to happen over the next 30 years?

Thirty years ago, when I was writing my first novel in Paris, there were about five and a half billion people on Earth. Today, there are over nine billion. Thirty years before that, when


I was born, the world population was only three and a half billion. That's the most radical change that has taken place during my lifetime. Compared to it, the collapse of the Eastern Bloc and such things are just a ripple. *Border State* is already a historical novel; it depicts a world that no longer exists. Stepping out onto the sidewalk in Paris in 1993, it was still possible to disappear, to become nobody, to become anybody. No one knew who you were because you didn't have a phone in your pocket and everything that comes with it. It's odd that just like everything else, technology is simultaneously liberating and enslaving. It's simply no longer possible to experience that total freedom of being anyone, at least not naturally and without making much of an effort.

Books are companions in loneliness—it's nice if they help us to get by better in any way. But I also don't believe that one can understand humankind without understanding themselves.

Thirty years from now? Maybe AI will be writing novels about us, and we'll read them (if we're still reading) with gusto! The idea does make me feel a little queasy and I'd rather not live in such a world, but who knows. So long as there's air, water, and food, meaning green plants that photosynthesize and nourish us, so long will we be able to live in this world. At every instant, the life that we live is totally self-evident and totally baffling, all at once.

Maia Tammjärv (b. 1986) is an Estonian literary critic and editor.





TÖNU ÕNNEPALU believes that nature simply exists and we don't know why, because we ourselves are also a part of its existence / photo Triin Maasik

Feeling Backward: *Border State* Thirty Years Later

by Raili Marling

This year marks the thirtieth birthday of Tõnu Õnnepalu's, aka Emil Tode's Border State (1993), one of the most widely translated contemporary Estonian novels, published in close to 20 languages.

It has been lauded as an iconic representation of the emotions accompanying the post-Soviet transition: the desire to blend into Old Europe, while experiencing imposter syndrome, and the desire to leave Estonia behind, while missing its landscapes. Estonians today are no longer angrily mesmerized by department store windows, like the narrator, but their sense of a specifically Eastern European identity has been harder to erase. When *Border State* came out, there were practically no literary representations of same-sex desire written in Estonian. While the acceptance of sexual and gender minorities has increased in the past thirty years, recent marriage equality debates have also revealed lasting prejudices. Thus, it is a good time to revisit *Border State*.

With its forward and backward gaze, the novel is of its time and ahead of its time. It is worth stressing that *Border State* brought the techniques of what has come to be called autofiction into Estonian literature before it became an international fashion in the 2010s (think of the success of Karl Ove Knausgård's autofiction work, for example). By 2021,

autofiction had outlived its freshness in English, but it was only emerging in the 1990s, practiced by writers tied to the French intellectual life. Õnnepalu caught this trend before it became a major international fashion.

Autofiction, as defined by the French novelist Serge Doubrovsky in 1977, is based on autobiographical material that is given fictional form to escape the constraints of a true life story. The author uses his or her life or even name, but subjects this material to experimental fictional techniques. This genre has a long tradition in France for exploring gender and sexuality. It was used in the 1990s by Hervé Guibert to convey the AIDS experience with candor and considerable indiscretion. Although his most famous book, *To the Friend Who Did Not Save My Life* (1990), was published in English in 1993, it did not find a receptive audience. Today, however, Guibert is considered the forefather of popular autofiction writers who analyze their sexuality, such as Édouard Louis.

Border State seems to have already picked up this generative influence in 1993. The novel is written as an extended letter to an American called Angelo. The narrator has no name and, thanks to the lack of grammatical gender in Estonian, no gender (the English translation makes the narrator male,

though). The narrative evolves in a series of fragments that shift between the narrator's memories of growing up in an unnamed Eastern European country in the north, easily identified as Estonia, and his life in Paris. The narrator has received a scholarship to translate post-WWII French poetry, but the stress is on his relationship with a French academic, Franz, who has died. Whether the narrator killed him is unclear, but we see a love-hate relationship both with Franz and France. The narrator meditates extensively on the East-West relationship and on performing an identity more broadly.

The first sentence of the novel identifies the narrator as a "bystander observing the world" (Õnnepalu, 2000: 1). At times, this bystander has an eager face pressed up against the shop window of Western Europe, to borrow an image from the novel but, at other times, the narrator is also an astute critic of Western hypocrisies. This format allows Õnnepalu to play with confession in the Foucauldian vein, as has been noted by Skerrett (2006) and Laanes (2009). Laanes (2009: 233-243), in particular, has shown the tension between the desire to give an account of oneself and the resistance to the confessional mode that fixes one in rigid truth regimes. While promising us revelations about one's true identity—sexual or ethnic—the first-person narrative instead challenges the confessional norm of coming out as a gay man or as an Eastern European trying to pass in Paris. The confession does not reveal but obfuscates. This unwillingness to reveal should not be read as a sign of shame, but a creative strategy in tune with the queer theory that also emerged in the 1990s. There is no one truth to confess, no fixed self to reveal. The identity of the narrator,

following the ideas of Judith Butler, is performative, citational, and fluid.

Such opacity, as Nicholas de Villiers (2012) proposes, allows subjects to resist compulsory transparency, in recognition of the often contradictory human desires. A person need not be one thing all the time. Sexuality might not be the most telling element of a person's life or work. This opacity leaves space for creativity, as Õnnepalu hints at in the novel: "There is something on one side and something on the other side of the

TÕNU ÕNNEPALU

Border State

Northwestern University

Press, 2000, 100 pp.



border but there is no border. /... / And if you should happen to stand on the border, then you too are invisible, from either side" (Önnepalu, 2000: 97).

In *Border State*, identity labels are shown to be simplifying classification tools that fail to explain individual or socio-historic complexity. Instead, they recreate convenient hierarchies between the norm and deviance (being poor, immigrant or gay). The Eastern European narrator is a metaphorical drag artist who, by mimicking the cultured Westerners, shows the artificiality of the East-West distinction, and its rootedness in power imbalances. This imbalance puts the narrator's country of origin in the past century for the Westerners, who want to believe that they inhabit a sleek future, and refuse to acknowledge the shared present. As the narrator acerbically notes, "When they hear you're from Eastern Europe they look on you with pity and speak with hollow words, as if you were a dead relative" (Önnepalu, 2000: 45). It is comforting to place the East in another time, forever chasing Western modernity with no hope of catching up, the barbarian waiting for the *mission civilisatrice*. Yet, the Eastern gaze is also necessary for the West to create its own identity. As the narrator notes:

As a true East European I sat bright-eyed and listened to his outrageous ideas about freedom, about Foucault and Derrida. Why not? Especially for the promise of a delicious supper in the luxurious ambience of ancient Europe. I listened as a courtesan listens to her client, as a prostitute! All Eastern Europe has become a prostitute. From governments and university professors on, to the last paperboy, they are all ready to listen to wonderful speeches about democracy, equality, whatever you please,

whatever the customer wishes! As long as he pays. (Önnepalu, 2000: 20-21)

The narrator sees through this sense of superiority and wants "to expose the chaos that lay beneath those surfaces, always on the brink of exposure" (Önnepalu, 2000: 8-9). Westerners are self-satisfied and have come to accept their optimistic stories, ignoring double standards and fruit with no taste. They speak empty words about how interesting it must be to witness something real happening in Eastern Europe, while ignoring the human cost of this restructuring (Önnepalu, 2000: 75). Crisis is something that the West thinks it has left behind, while ignoring the AIDS epidemic unfolding in its own cities.

The West expects the legibility of gender and sexual identity, but the narrator does not give us a neat coming-out story. In a dream, the narrator sees himself as a Barbie doll who, upon being forced to strip by the police, relishes in revealing a sexless and opaque plastic body to the disciplinary gaze. He presents us with imaginaries of outré campy outfits, indirect hints at promiscuity, cruising, and even AIDS. These signifiers of gay sensibility and sexuality, however, appear in an ironic manner, suggesting that this, too, is a citational performance for the narrator's desires to remain ambivalent: "I live a life that doesn't interest me, say things I don't believe, spend money that isn't mine" (Önnepalu, 2000: 56). There is no simple contrast between homophobic East and tolerant West. Norms, be they hetero- or homonormative, burden the narrator in both contexts.

The most vivid image, returned to multiple times, concerns grass, "ready for submissive death" yet triumphant over human life (Önnepalu, 2000: 11).

Towards the end of the novel, the narrator muses that his failure was the attempt to leave his place, “in the world of plants, in Eastern Europe” and pass for something else: “I wanted to see what it would be like to be human, to live like a human being. That was my terrible crime that I won’t be forgiven. I went along with the game, but passively, without believing in it.” (Önnepalu, 2000: 70) The crime, thus, is not sexual nonconformity, but wanting to be a European and an individual, without placing oneself into the simplifying binary regimes of truth.

Önnepalu’s novel allows us to relive and re-feel the transition period, along with its unease about belonging and exclusion. At the same time, it remains scathingly relevant. *Border State* recalls Lauren Berlant’s observation that autobiography is personal and general. Even today, Önnepalu touches a social nerve and allows us to feel backward into the past and, perhaps, to better imagine our shared present.

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Bystander observing the world in Paris /
photo Giuseppe Mondì/Unsplash



Literature Should Tell Complete Stories—That is its Essence

by Annika A. Koppel

The history of the novel-writing competition organized by the Estonian Writers' Union goes back nearly a century, albeit with interruptions. In 2014, it was restarted with the help of private sponsorship. Sixty-two manuscripts were submitted for this year's competition and judged by a specially convened jury.

Head of the Estonian Writers' Union Tiit Aleksejev and jury chair Rein Raud shared their impressions of the 2023 competition.

TIIT ALEKSEJEV / photo Kris Moor



What significance does the competition have in Estonian literature and/or society? Can we say that it's affected the development of Estonian literature as a whole?

RR: The novel-writing competition is an important tradition because it negates the defensiveness of the literary establishment, which is prevalent both in Estonia and elsewhere. The jury does not know the author of any given manuscript and each is evaluated purely on artistic credibility. This year, we decided to not even open the rest of the envelopes containing the names of authors who did not place or receive special mention. Thus, even a writer who is worried that their identity and fame, or lack thereof, might evoke certain prejudices among publishers can submit their manuscripts with peace of mind, which ensures greater unfettered development for Estonian literature.

TA: One strong aspect of the competition seems to be new authors and literary debuts. Surprises, in short. It allows debutants the courage to submit a manuscript and experienced authors the opportunity to try something completely new. One fine example is Piret Jaaks, who made her name



REIN RAUD / photo Kris Moor

as a playwright but delighted us with a strong historical novel this year.

What trends did the 2023 competition display?

RR: This was my first year on the jury so I can't compare it to earlier years, but one thing that stood out was the authors' reluctance to address contemporary Estonian society. Many stories were either set in the past or in faraway countries, both at the same time, or in imaginary worlds altogether. Another thing I noticed was that there were relatively few classical novels, i.e. a story with a uniform plot and characters who evolve under a functional influence. More frequently, the works comprised a series of short scenes connected by a couple of static protagonists. Unfortunately, Estonian literary reviews have recently encouraged stories in which nothing really happens; it's almost become

a criterium of "quality literature". That shouldn't be the case. Literature shouldn't give up telling complete stories—that is its essence. Luckily, there were also novels that showed that the skill hasn't been lost.

Another curious aspect was that while established writers usually stand out in the competition, they were in the minority this year and the top places went to emerging authors. That's to be celebrated.

TA: Each competition has brought forth topics or issues that are socially relevant at the given time. In this sense, Stendhal's mirror effect¹ remains valid.

¹ "Ah, Sir, a novel is a mirror carried along a high road. At one moment it reflects to your vision the azure skies, at another the mire of the puddles at your feet. And the man who carries this mirror in his pack will be accused by you of being immoral! His mirror shews the mire, and you blame the mirror!" Stendhal, *The Red and the Black*.

The prevailing tone in 2023 was a desire to break away or escape—from oneself, a restrictive environment or relationship, or Eastern Europe as a whole. There was also an apparent stylistic shift: whereas, until the dawn of the 21st-century, literature was influenced primarily by other literature, original impulses now lie elsewhere—in television dramas or computer games. Not for all stories, of course, but certainly the majority.

In what ways was the first-place work, Sven Mikser's *Vareda*, outstanding and memorable?

RR: The jury's decision was relatively unanimous, awarding it first place with only one exception. *Vareda* is a psychologically precise, gripping, linguistically masterful coming-of-age novel that explores a young artist's development on multiple levels. The book stays meticulously faithful to historical detail while also transcending its own spacetime, both with allusions to art history and well-captured nuances of the human experience. I was gripped from the very first pages and didn't put it down till the end.

TA: I was fascinated most by *Vareda*'s descriptions of visual art; by its ubiquitous *chiaroscuro*. The protagonist is influenced by Caravaggio and greatly views the world through the artist's paintings. At the same time, the story isn't left to drift—the novel is sturdily anchored to its era and environment and is emphatically straightforward. Its associations with painting are finely luminescent without the author flaunting his

knowledge, which is a sign of fine literature.

The winning manuscript is translated into English. How have the translations fared so far?

RR: I checked whether the most successful winning manuscript, Vahur Afanasjev's *Serafima and Bogdan*—which received several other prizes—has been published in English. Although it seems the translation has been complete for several years, nothing has happened with it yet. So, unfortunately, it appears the measure hasn't had a very big impact.

TA: No winning work has had a million-copy print run. However, a translation at least provides the theoretical opportunity for an international breakthrough.

This year marks 30 years since the publishing of *Border State* by Emil Tode (Tõnu Õnnepalu), which is one of the most important and widely translated works of Estonian literature. Is Estonia still a border state in literary terms? What has changed?

RR: I believe that Estonian literature is doing well in the world, especially taking into account that the language barrier doesn't impede the dissemination of music or visual art, for example. I gather that translators of Estonian literature working in every language have a long docket ahead of them, and there are more and more countries and foreign publishers developing an interest in us. At the same time, it sometimes feels like Western readers are primarily looking for Estonia to produce

stories of trauma and an interpretation of mythical Estonianism, as if we're exotic beings totally defined by an unforgiving heritage. When I spoke at the London Book Fair a few years ago, the first thing that almost every journalist asked me was what it means to be Estonian. I can't imagine anyone in distant Asia or South America asking an English writer what it means to be English. In that sense, we're most definitely still a border state.

TA: Estonia is a border state in every respect, and it will stay that way. "Border" sometimes means conflict, other times communication, and often both simultaneously. Destructive experience and enriching experience, depending on the inner strength and the field lines of the era. As for changes in our literature, Estonian authors have perhaps been transplanted internationally more often and as individual cases.

How will Estonian literature develop in the coming decades, and in what direction? What would you like to see?

RR: I like that Estonian literature is limitlessly diverse in terms of both genre and style, and I hope it will remain that way. It may sound a little formal, but there is a tirelessly referenced line in the beginning of our Constitution that reads, the state "[...] must guarantee the preservation of the Estonian people, the Estonian language, and the Estonian culture through the ages [...]". This, I believe, is first and foremost a challenge for authors—whether we're able to write books that keep at least one foot in the Estonian linguistic

space, as such works are crucial. If our literature should turn bland and become no more than a local outlet for global trends, then Estonian readers may cross over to any bigger language in peace. All in all, I don't believe that will happen.

TA: The future usually dawns differently than any oracle may prophesize, so I'll refrain from speculating. Nevertheless, desire possesses its own power and I'd like Estonian literature to be as rich as possible.

Annika A. Koppel (b. 1964) is the editor-in-chief of Estonian Literary Magazine.



Vareda

by Sven Mikser

Excerpt from the manuscript

And then it's over. Karel is home that night. He sees me from the kitchen window and comes to the door, eyes wide with excitement and agitation. My heart sinks. He speaks conspiratorially at a half-whisper, and I can't quite make out the words but, somehow, I already know what he wants to say. Joonas is gone. Dead. Days ago.

I hear the blood rushing in my ears. I'm unable to speak. Karel stands on the stairs and calls out after me. I walk faster and faster until I'm finally running, haphazard and aimless. Not home, I don't want to go there right now. Joonas is dead. I'm never going to see him again. He's failed me. How could he do this to me?

As I exit the last glowing circle the streetlights cast onto the pavement, I stop and look around, panting. I've made it to the old slaughterhouse on the edge of town and am surrounded by nothing but oppressive late-autumn darkness. I'm doused in sweat. The damp, bitter wind mercilessly penetrates my thin nylon jacket and I suddenly realize that I'm hungry.

The radio crackles as Mom mumbles irritably to herself. She hasn't noticed me coming in. I stand motionless in the entryway and listen to my heart throb. Greenish light seeps through the clouded flower-patterned glass of the kitchen door, reflecting in the big frameless mirror on the wall. Everything is the same except that Joonas is dead. I don't know how to grieve him. I've never had to do anything like it in the fourteen years I've been alive.

Mom manages to tune the old radio more clearly and now I can hear what they're saying. The Berlin Wall has fallen. People are crowding around the checkpoints. Haven't you heard? The mayor himself allegedly proclaimed the border's open to everyone, now!

The soldiers are in disarray, not that anyone could hold back the euphoric masses. Those who can't squeeze through the gates are putting up ladders brought from home, straddling the concrete wall. Cheering. Some of the more industrious revelers have seized hammers and crowbars to demolish the despised wall right here

and now. Mom shakes her head. It's always the same: champagne and streamers at first, dogs and bullets later.

I gulp, and it sounds as if I'm short of breath.

"Are you crying?" Mom asks, astonished, peering over the frames of her glasses, which have slipped down to the tip of her nose.

She cradles me that night. I don't speak a word. There's nothing to say. Mom didn't know Joonas.

* * *

The painting only comes to mind several days later. No one should ever see it, nobody but me. Maybe it's already too late. But if it's still there in his tumbledown cottage, hidden under a dirty rag on the easel, then... I do have a key.

I don't go home after school. I meander along the narrow side streets until it's dark enough. Luckily, I don't have to wander very long. It's November.

The garden gate creaks. I don't dare close it properly behind me. I stand stock-still for a few minutes, trying to blend in with the trunk of a towering bare linden. Cozy light filters through the curtains before Karel's window.

Opening the cottage door is easier said than done. I have to juggle the key back and forth for a while before the lock gives way. It's pitch-black inside, but I came prepared. The flashlight beam drifts around the space. There it is. Without a moment's hesitation, I snatch it from the easel and stare at the image of myself, my ragged breath coming out in a whistle.

I don't really know what I was expecting, but what's before me is something completely different. There I am, standing naked on the shore and holding a big white seashell in my palm.

There's no time to study it further. The painting is too big to wedge under my arm and carry home. I try to pry loose the staples holding the canvas to the frame without causing any damage. Several precious minutes tick away due to my hands trembling with fear and nervousness. Impatiently, I gnaw at my bottom lip. What will I say if I'm found out?

But no one enters. With the rolled-up canvas hugged to my chest, I creep out of the cottage. I leave the key in the lock; I won't be needing it anymore.

The next day after school, I finally have a chance to inspect the painting more closely in daylight while I'm home alone.

Breakers are rolling to shore one after another and somewhere in the distance, the blue of the sea blends with the azure sky. The

water sparkles and I can almost hear the screeching of seagulls careening over the frothy crests. Standing at the edge of the water is a boy, barely pubescent, holding a snow-white seashell, skinny and pale, the shadow of a smile on his narrow, compressed lips.

I'm much younger in the painting, that much is obvious. It's true that I was a late bloomer. I skipped many a swimming class in the spring of fifth grade because I was almost the only boy without a single hair below the belt and felt terrible shame. But years have passed since then, and I can barely remember my bare groin.

I roll the canvas back up and stuff it beneath the bookcase where I keep all my secret things. I've got to try to put it out of my mind for good. And Joonas, too, though it's not easy.

Even so, I manage to pull it off pretty well until one damp and muddy February afternoon when I come home from school and find my mom, with her face blotched and distraught. She sends Krissi to her bedroom and sits me down on the couch. The rolled-up canvas is lying on the coffee table, so it isn't hard to figure out what's the matter.

"Did he undress you?"

She shakes me by the shoulder.

"Did he touch you? What did he do to you?"

I jerk free of her grip. An immense wave of agony rises within me. It wells to my throat, a giant formless mass, and spills from my eyes as heavy, salty tears. They stream down my cheeks, but I don't try to wipe them away.

"No one has touched me. What's your problem with him? Not even he touched me. Joonas is dead, damn it! Buried. I hope that makes you happy!"

Mom freezes in shock for a moment. Then, she releases something halfway between a sigh and a sob and makes an awkward attempt to hug me, but I push her away.

"It was usually so goddamn cold in that stupid shack of his that I didn't even take off my sweater. Joonas is an artist. Was an artist. You wouldn't understand it anyway. You don't understand anything at all!"

I've stopped crying. With almost contemptuous dignity, I pick up the canvas and stuff it back beneath the bookcase. That's where it stays, and we never mention it again.

* * *

A whole heap of old blankets and some rolled-up red-striped mattresses are in the closet of the old manor entryway, left behind by summer campers. I rummage through them until I find

a blanket that's a little less tattered than the others. It should be fine for sunbathing—the athletic court behind the building is no fancy beach.

I strip down to my underwear and cautiously recline. A few white clumps of clover and pale pink daisies blossom in the neatly trimmed grass by my feet. Mom calls daisies 'margarets'. Buzzing angrily, a lone bumblebee circles above my head and the sky is so blue that it's impossible to stare at directly. The air is still and the soil beneath the ocher-scorched grass radiates heat.

Even through closed eyelids, the midsummer sun is unbearably bright. I squeeze my eyes shut even tighter until greenish rings and golden threads appear.

The silence is no longer silence, but a summery potpourri of soft sounds that echo in my ears. Grasshoppers. A bird whistles questioningly a couple of times, warbles, and then falls silent. A light breeze rustles the treetops. I roll over onto my stomach, rest my forehead on my arms, and allow sweet exhaustion to course through my body.

Suddenly, it's no longer leaves that are rustling. I'm by the sea; Mom and Krissi are here, too. My little sister and I are building a sandcastle on the water's edge. The sand is coarse and gritty and I'm digging a deep hole with my bare hands. Water seeps into the bottom. Wet sand spills through my fingers and forms delicate towers as it falls. I'm still very young and Krissi is just a tot, maybe three or four years old. She's patting sand pies and offering me a taste.

I stare out at the sea. The surface glitters and rays of sunlight penetrate the shallow water near the shore and make the sandy seabed glow golden.

Without warning, someone else is there. It's Joonas. I can't see him because he's standing behind me, but his shadow falls onto the water, tremulous, and I hear his calm voice.

"Water is difficult to paint."

"Harder than a person?" I ask softly, feeling my heart throb.

Krissi and Mom have disappeared. I don't look over my shoulder because I'm afraid that Joonas might be gone, too. But he's there, I can still hear his deep, steady breathing.

Apparently, my question goes unnoticed. He's silent for a while. We both are. Then, he continues speaking, though more to himself, not to me.

"Simply water. Not ships or cliffs, not the shimmer of sunlight on the surface. Simply water. Water is alive and at the same time inanimate. Tranquil and restless. It's seemingly composed entirely of light, but still ends deep in the darkness."

In the sand before my feet, golden bands dance alternately with shadows. My head starts to spin, and it suddenly feels like I'm staring at the iridescent surface of the water from underneath. I sink deeper and deeper, even though I know I must rise back to the surface at any cost. My arms and legs won't obey my commands, the light above me dims, and I can't tell whether the sun is concealed by a cloud or my fading consciousness.

I gasp for air, roll onto my back, and open my eyes. I'm lying on a worn blanket on the bleak athletic court behind Vareda School, and the sea is nowhere in sight. Neither is Joonas. He's dead. But the shadow that fell over me is real. A dark female silhouette against the radiant summer sky.

"Mom?!"

"Johannes, can you hear me?"

The voice belongs to Margit.

"Are you okay?" she asks in concern, kneeling on the edge of the blanket.

I nod and try to get to my feet, but my vision goes black, and I'm forced to crouch to maintain my balance. Margit rests her hand on my forehead.

"You haven't gotten sunstroke, have you?"

I shrug. I have no idea what the symptoms of sunstroke are. Margit places her palm between my shoulder blades, and I quiver, unable to tell whether her hand is ice cold or searing hot.

She helps me into the building, explaining all the while. Her high-pitched voice jingles like milk glasses in the sink when Mom washes dishes.

It's dim and chilly inside. Now, I'm simply cold. I sit on the edge of the couch, trembling from head to toe even though my shoulders and nape are burning.

"You're redder than a tomato," Margit says. "We need to rub something on your skin. You don't have lotion or anything, do you?"

I'm a boy and naturally have no cream anywhere. Margit digs through her olive purse. She shakes her head and spreads her arms.

"Mom puts sour cream on burns sometimes," I say through chattering teeth, just then noticing that all I'm wearing is a pair of striped blue underwear.

"Do you have some?" Margit asks.

No. No sour cream.

"I'll go look for something," she says. "Get dressed in the meantime. You'll catch a cold."

Staring out the window, I watch her mount her bike. Gingerly, I wrap myself in a green-checkered wool blanket. It's rough and

pain shoots across my burned skin. Minutes pass. Maybe they are hours.

Finally, she returns.

“Alright. Bring your back over here.”

Margit sets a sand-colored jar down on the table. It isn’t sour cream. I drop the blanket from my shoulders and turn my back to her. Her breath is like a blowtorch on my neck, but maybe it’s just my burnt skin. With extreme caution, she rubs a cooling ointment on my florid body. Her gentle hands make slow circles on my nape and gradually move downward. Then, her slender, limber fingers tiptoe back up my spine like little elf feet, coming to a stop close to my hairline. Just like Mom did when she dressed me in the morning before kindergarten.

“Oh, your ears!” Margit exclaims.

I can feel them burning, too. She dips two fingers into the jar and gently applies the ointment to my earlobes. I let her, even though I could just as well have done it myself.

“Well, that should help,” she concludes, giving my striped underwear a playful slap.

My butt cheeks cramp and sharp pain explodes through my loins.

Translated by Adam Cullen

SVEN MIKSER / photo Kris Moor

Sven Mikser (b. 1973) is an Estonian politician, a Member of the European Parliament since 2019, and the former Defense and Foreign Minister of Estonia. A member of the Estonian Social Democratic Party since 2005, he has served as the party chairman, and a five-time representative in Estonian Parliament (first as a member of the Center Party). Mikser graduated from the University of Tartu with a degree in English language and literature. His debut novel *Varede* won first place in the Estonian Writers’ Union’s 2023 novel-writing competition.





TRIIN PAJA / photo Colin Usher

TRIIN PAJA (b. 1990) is the author of three Estonian-language poetry collections and a recipient of the Värsk Rõhk Poetry Award, the Betti Alver Literary Award, and the Juhan Liiv Prize for Poetry. Her English poetry has received two Pushcart Prizes and her chapbook, *Sleeping in a Field* (coming out in 2024), won the Wolfson Poetry Chapbook Prize. Her poetry has been translated into English, Czech, Finnish, Russian, Lithuanian, Latvian, and Slovenian, and she is a member of the Estonian Writers' Union. She has translated poems by Ocean Vuong, Jacqueline Winter Thomas, Indrė Valantinaitė, Benediktas Januševičius, Dovilė Kuzminskaitė, Kirils Vilhelms Ēcis, Lote Vilma, Donika Kelly, and Fatimah Asghar into Estonian.

by Triin Paja

Dad's Legs

broad daylight, naked beneath the covers,
thunder and my partner's breathing

in my ears and on my shoulder,
I think of dad's legs.

my sister and I were stork chicks on his tanned
knees. so says a black-and-white photo.

legs that later languished
and will never leave grandma's side again.

I'd keep those hairs,
dark and gross like fly legs,

in a silver 19th-century tobacco box,
if I had them. touch is exceptional

when it's thundering and the window's open.
each is buried apart

in the family grave. I'd certainly like
if we all held hands underground.

Chest

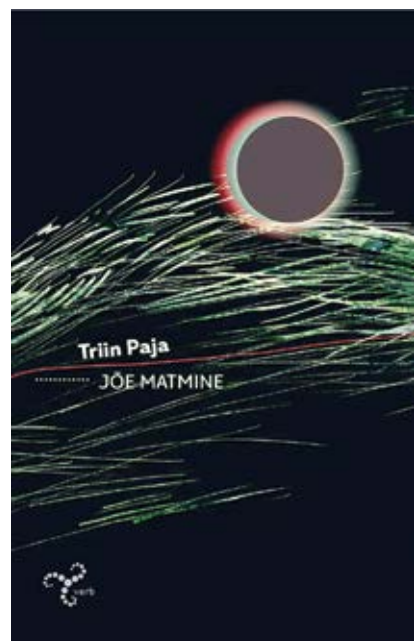
people believed that cranes swallowed heavy stones
before a storm to keep the wind from sweeping them
every which way. grandpa
was even lighter than me by the end.
the wind carried him away.
he left early to buy orange juice
for his hungover daughter.
he spoiled dad.
he peeled pomegranates,
filled bowls
with ruby seeds,
served them to his grandchild.
he carried water, he gave blood, he surrendered.
he lies deep in the raven of my pupil.
I know how exceptional even tar and sweat are,
because he no longer knows.
listen, now,
to the rain falling softly,
murmuring like mossy stones.
someone climbs out of the velvety interior
of the chest of grandpa's body.

The Dead Love Not the Land

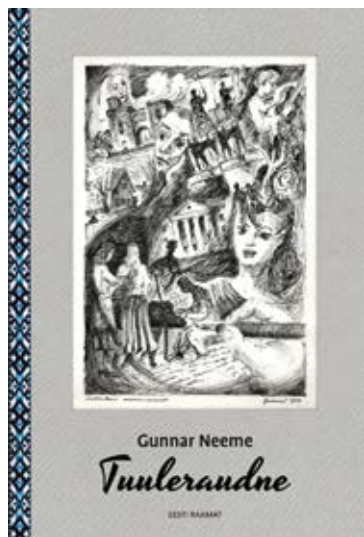
the sky is a dress mended with golden thread
 that grandma wears. dad dips down to the sea in
 funnels like sleeves, though he knows not to drink.
 the steeple in which dad and grandma drank together
 is the image of a church tower coated in ash.
 dad departed six months
 after grandma –
 mother took son along.
 I run through nettles.
 I dig up grandma's hair.
 braiding it I realize the dead
 love not the land, but the sky, water's promise.

Translated by Adam Cullen

TRIIN PAJA
Jõe matmine
Burying the river
 Verb, 2022, 56 pp.
 ISBN 9789916978702



Book Reviews



GUNNAR NEEME

Tuuleraudne

Windsure

Compiled by Karmen Maat

Eesti Raamat, 2023. 224 pp.

ISBN 9789916126073 (print)

ISBN 9789916126080 (e-pub)

Review by Janika Kronberg

Gunnar Neeme (1918–2005) lived most of his life in Australia and achieved international recognition as an artist. He published two Estonian-language poetry collections, three English-language collections, and wrote several plays. The posthumous publishing of his short-story collection *Tuuleraudne* (*Windsure*) could very well be the surprise of the year in Estonian literature.

Windsure comprises eight short stories that Karmen Maat, who compiled the book and wrote the foreword, has arranged into a coherent whole according to the author's probable wishes. Underpinning the stories are events that Neeme no doubt experienced first-hand. Still, the work cannot be deemed autobiographical as such, as there are almost no references to any true figures, events, or settings. Neeme fought for Estonia's freedom in the Second World War while wearing a foreign uniform, just as many of his compatriots were forced to do. His stories contain the voice of a generation that was patriotic but betrayed and exiled. Deft, delicately crafted, and full of pathos that expresses the absurdity of war—something that is all too relevant today—Neeme's writing was clearly a way for him to work through wartime trauma.

The book's title is both symbolic and polysemantic. It asks whether 'windsure' (Estonian '*tuuleraudne*') is a destructive force of nature comparable to war, or the ability to resist and a reference to the divine altar to the narrating soldier once knelt before? Neeme's style is polyphonic, self-argumentative, aphoristic, and paradoxical. A clear example of his intended contradictions can be found in one of his invented compound words: *kääbushiiglane*, or dwarf-giant. Anxiety and the hor-



GUNNAR NEEME / photo Archive

rors of war often echo in Neeme's rushing, elliptical sentences that alternate with longer essayistic discourse. Contrasting civilization and a lifestyle in tune with nature, finding safety in memories of the forest and his time as a shepherd, Neeme—a hopeless romantic—remains a child of nature. He extolls nests and dens while juxtaposing them with artificial human houses, which are akin to prisons and set off a wicked chain reaction that only leads to destruction: street, city, machine, war. Moral pathos is self-evident in Neeme's writing, but his inner voice and inner debates never produce unambiguous answers. Is a soldier a hero, a criminal, or something else entirely? Where is the line between freedom and anarchy? How should one understand the dizzying contrasts that appear in people's lives during war?

The collection's final story, "Closedness", is a discourse on art philosophy that is paradoxical in and of itself as it focuses foremost on seeking openness. At the forefront are Neeme's research and accomplishments in the field of visual art, to which the text is a worthy parallel. Just as in his art, the author creates powerful and vibrantly colorful literary images, the expressiveness of

which alternates with a rich impressionistic palette. Exalting life and its diversity, Neeme writes that the singular is colorless, but plurality possesses a prism.

Unlike Neeme's popular color-rich paintings, the book's war-themed illustrations are strikingly black and white. Whereas his art generally doesn't dwell on topics of war, his prose seems to yank readers into the heart of it. With potent idiosyncrasy, *Windsure* is a powerful word in humanist Estonian war prose.

Janika Kronberg (b. 1963) is an Estonian literary scientist and critic.



VIIVI LUIK
Kuldne kroon
The Golden Crown

EKSA, 2023, 295 pp.
 ISBN 9789916677421

Review by Aija Sakova

Viivi Luik is undoubtedly one of the most important and international-



VIIVI LUIK / photo Kris Moor

ly renowned authors of Estonian literature. Enchanting Estonian readers in the mid-1960s with her nature poetry, when she was 18 years old, her first novel *The Seventh Spring of Peace* was published in the mid-1980s and became a bestseller. Written from a child's perspective, the book not only put into words the attitude towards life of an entire post-war generation, but also showed that the courage and will to live is not dependent on the regime and is accessible to each individual.

The publication of Viivi Luik's second novel *The Beauty of History* falls directly into the period of the fall of the Soviet Union. Published in 1991, the book portrays the time around 1968. Again – as in “Shadow Theatre” (2010) – time and the human being are interwoven and the individual is concerned with breaking free from the spell of his time, at least mentally.

Although Viivi Luik's novels are written in Estonian, they belong to world literature, and both require and find engagement outside the Estonian language. In addition to her novels, her poetry, radio plays, and essays have also been published

in various European languages. Her essays often provide an unexpectedly sharp focus on the circumstances of our time.

Luik's latest novel, *The Golden Crown*, is a collection of magical moments shared with people who are no longer living. The book comprises 22 stories: 20 literary portraits of late friends and two pieces on the topic of writing. It opens with “The Key to the Book”, a brief self-interview, and concludes with almost encyclopedic biographies of the characters portrayed and, in some cases, stories from their lives. The use of these sections is a poetic means to help prevent and divert discussions on the work's genre.

Among those portrayed are Luik's writer-friends (Juhan Viiding, Mati Unt, Ene Mihkelson, Artur Alliksaar, Uku Masing, Jaan Kross, Jaan Kaplinski), artist-friends (Andres Tolts, Mare Vint, Olev Subbi), philosopher-friends and esteemed persons (Vello Salo, Marju Lepajõe, Lennart Meri, Anne Fried), a publisher (Hans Georg Heepe), family members (Hans Kitsing, Johannes Luik, Hilda Luik), and writers whom the author never personally met (A. H. Tammsaare, Thomas Mann).

The portrait of Juhan Viiding begins: “Whoever believes that memories reveal another person is mistaken. All memories only reveal the one who is remembering.” (p. 39) With this, Luik hints that although the book contains many true accounts of both the author and her close friends and family, they shouldn't be read merely as biographical revelations. Rather, they hold clues to how one might recognize and appreciate the wonder and fragility of the world around us.

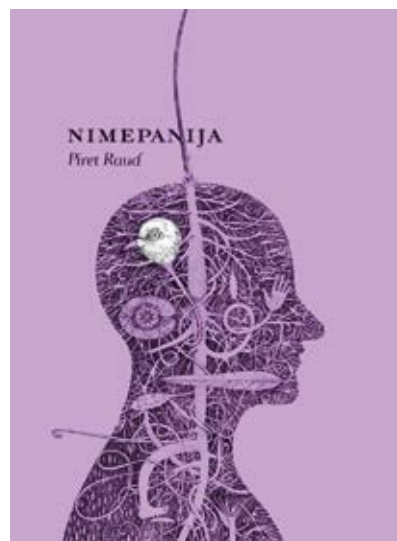
Luik is fascinated by the dark side of life—what we fear, why, and how words may be used to overcome it. In the first story, “The King and the Poet”, the author describes her most significant reading places and the importance of reading aloud, retelling stories, what books mean to her, and how to interpret the Word becoming Flesh and the Flesh becoming Word. Luik shares the influences on her path to becoming a writer and details the foundations of her poetry.

What matters most is the understanding that writing cannot be a goal in and of itself. That, which is written—the Word—must express the writer, their era, and beauty. In other words, the Flesh must become the Word. For this to be at all possible, one must learn to practice humility; must perceive human mortality and the hazard of beauty. One must physically feel the meaning of fear and find the courage to confront it. It’s interesting to note that many of Luik’s favorite reading places are tied to the proximity of death, places that somehow resemble sepulchers or sarcophaguses.

“The Professor and the Young Woman”, which is nestled in the middle of the collection, is a story or parable about the professionalism of writing that claims creating rudimentary texts is a sin and a crime. The piece stands in dialogue with the allegory of Uncle Gottfried in “The King and the Poet”.

The Golden Crown instructs us to pay attention to life’s magical moments. It shows how Flesh can become Word and offer encouragement to anyone who wishes to see and hear.

Aija Sakova (b. 1980) is a writer, literary scholar, and a manager of culture and research. She currently works as a Head of the Research Administration Office of Tallinn University. She has published academic books on Christa Wolf and Ene Mihkelson, as well as a poetry book, essay collections, and a book of letters to the writer and pianist Kābi Laretei.



PIRET RAUD

Nimepanija

The Namer

Illustrated by Piret Raud

Tänapäev, 2022, 160 pp

ISBN 9789916172681

Review by **Karola Karlson**

Not only do Piret Raud’s children’s books embellish the bookshelves of every book-loving family in Estonia, but they have also been translated across the globe. However, Raud’s new short story collection, *The Namer*, is best saved for grown-ups. The collection, which brought her the 2022 Cultural Endowment

of Estonia Prose Award, shines bright like a flame.

Fire, the fervid shadow haunting Raud's magical realism, is always on the hunt, hungry to get its claws into any character's self-awareness or destiny. Raud has a clear preference for building up intricate webs of stories, only to destroy it all pages later in an efficient, all-destructive fire. The characters in Raud's stories are young 20 to 30-somethings, thrown helter-skelter into the sea of life. The lucky ones will only begin to regret their choices by the very end of the story. Raud's collection has an aura of sweet-scented Nordic *noir*, cute yet uncanny. The stories line up like colorful Matryoshka dolls, their surface adorned with humor and hope, yet ruin and destruction appear as you descend deeper under the multilayered mystique.

Nordic fiction has the tendency to be depressive and grim. So does life, and the author has found a gripping balance. The stories in *The Namer* have the magical quality of comforting the reader by horrifying them

gently. You'll feel blessed that you're not one of the characters.

The collection's title story follows a woman traveling to an island to meet the Namer. Will her newborn be named Thief, Drunkard, Fool, Pauper, or something even worse? In another story, a woman finds herself sharing a bench with local village women. Responding to a kind invitation, the first woman sits down, realizing too late that she's become part of a dark and enveloping secret.

It takes an attentive and steady reader to handle several of Raud's stories in a single reading. The writer leaves her subjects, both fictional and participatory, suffocating in the flames of unsparing plot twists. Depending on your readerly inclinations, you are either left gasping for air or calling for extra heat. In any case, it is unlikely that Raud's stories will leave you cold: you'll be pulled out of the mundane quotidian rhythm, your expectations *vis-à-vis* the plot broken to ashes.

The Namer is a kaleidoscopic collection, glimmering with many shades of emotion—from ultimate happiness to the lowest despair. Are you brave enough to step aboard the boat and find out which way the wind blows?

Karola Karlson (b 1993) is a literary critic who dabbles in fiction. She received the Looming Debuting Writer Award in 2023.

PIRET RAUD / photo Ingrid Maasik





PIRET RAUD

Järve kiri

The Lake's Letter

Illustrated by Piret Raud

Tänapäev, 2023, 48 pp.

ISBN 9789916173459

Review by Jaanika Palm

Although renowned for her outstandingly unique picture books, Piret Raud has spent the last few years focusing on writing fiction for adults. *The Lake's Letter*, published in early spring of this year, was thus a delightful surprise for fans of her children's works. Although the author herself hesitates to classify it as a children's book per se, the topics addressed and the emotions described are far from unfamiliar to young readers.

The protagonist is a lake nestled deep within a forest. Although he lives in a wonderful place (butterflies and dragonflies whirl above him in the daytime, and at night, the moon and stars are reflected in his water), he is melancholic. Specifically, he is yearning. He yearns for the sea, whom he's never actually met. But one day, a bottle sinks into the lake's deepest pocket of yearning and dares to ask why he's so down in the dumps.

"I'd like the sea to know I'm thinking about her. It'd like her to

know I wish her well," the lake sighs to the bottle. "Write to her!" the bottle proposes. "I'll gladly deliver your letter." The lake takes the bottle's advice and starts composing a letter.

Despite its brevity, Raud's writing is as pleasantly layered and open to multiple interpretations, as with her earlier picture books. Upon first reading, one might only grasp the simple storyline, which is engaging and full of twists, but as the book concludes, realization dawns that many pages beckon the reader to return for a reevaluation. One factor is the associative richness of the text, though Raud's poetic mode of expression also invites one to reread passages over and over again and commit their beauty to memory. Her concise style, polished and bereft of excessive ballast, effortlessly draws one along, uplifting and offering plenty to consider—another reason to spend as much time as possible in the world of Raud's yearning lake. We long for confirmation that a solution can always be found in even the most difficult situation, and all we must do is stay persistent in our efforts. We want to believe that poetry has the ability to change the world; that there are literary works that can touch and move even the most callous soul.

While Raud's earlier books haven't been particularly colorful, *The Lake's Letter* is even more laconic and unassuming, using a sparse palette of black, white, and blue. Nevertheless, these minimalist tools produce entrancing and detailed illustrations that harmonize perfectly with the elegant and highly refined writing. Whoever studies the illustrations will find an abundance of

charming and fantastical artistic approaches. For whom other than Piret Raud knows how to depict a sad lake, a grumpy bridge, or the appearance of an all-uplifting poem?



HASSO KRULL

Laps ja kuu

The Child and the Moon

Illustrated by Lucija Mrzljak

Kaksikhammas, 2023, 39 pp.

ISBN 9789916954751

Review by Jaanika Palm

Hasso Krull, one of the most renowned contemporary Estonian thinkers, essayists, and translators, began working with children's literature when he and Carolina Pihelgas, a poet and fiction writer, translated Swedish classic Elsa Beskow's rhyming fairy tales into Estonian (*Children of the Forest* and *Peter in Blueberry Land*). His first original children's book, *The Evil Fish Café* (2019, illustrated by Marja-Liisa Plats) was soon followed by *The Kitty and the Flood* (2020, also illustrated by Marja-Liisa



HASSO KRULL / photo Kris Moor

Plats), and *The Wolf and the Bear* (2020, illustrated by Albert Gulk). Like these books, his fourth and most recent children's work, *The Child and the Moon*, encourages children to drift a little farther from reality.

The Child and the Moon tells of an ordinary evening when, just as always, twilight settles over the trees, the birds stop singing, and the sun sets in the west. Mommy and Daddy made the beds, drew the curtains, and brushed their teeth—tomorrow would be an early workday. Their child also needed to go to bed, though she didn't want to sleep, didn't want to brush her teeth, and didn't want to go to kindergarten the next day. She finally crawled underneath the covers, but the room was too dark and stuffy. So, Mommy pulled aside the curtains to let a little light in and Daddy opened the window so cool night air could enter. The child's parents fell fast asleep, but she was still wide awake. She walked to the window and looked up at the Moon. Finally, she worked up the courage to murmur a funny greeting. She could never have imagined that the moon would respond and lift her up into the sky next to him.

Below the surface of Krull's seemingly simple story is a mythical, mystical stratum with an enchanting effect that is difficult to put into words.

However, one thing is certain: his writing burrows its way into the senses, generating a profusion of fascinating thoughts and sparking introspection long after it is finished. Despite the varied layers and rich associations of Krull's children's books, they always remain suitable for early reading levels. What comes next? How does the story end? *The Child and the Moon* invites young readers to ask their own thought-provoking philosophical questions, and perhaps to even develop certain important values.

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



**MUDLUM
SIKAOŠÄK
TPWHLFYRC**

Illustrated by Maria-Kristiina Ulas
Strata, 2022, 204 pp.
ISBN 9789916414965

Review by **Silvia Urgas**

It's unlikely that Mudlum (Made Luiga) set out to write her last book, *Not Just My Aunt Ellen*, with intentions



MUDLUM / photo Kristjan Teedema / Scanpix

for it to receive awards and land her a spot in the Estonian literary canon, but that's just what happened. The novel that preceded it, *Polish Boys*, earned the EU Prize for Literature; advancing from such personal and successful works is quite a challenge. The author's seventh book, *TPWHLFYRC*, is no *magnum opus* or a generation- and era-defining Estonian Novel, but a stylistic exercise that explores the recent past.

Its title comes from one result of a personality test that was on rate.ee, an early-2000s Estonian social media network that was popular before Facebook. *TPWHLFYRC: The Person Who Helps Look For Your Runaway Cat* (submissive, introverted, emotional, and rationally minded). *TPWHLFYRC* is a children's book written for those who have heard of the acronym before, no matter that such "children" may already be in their 30s.

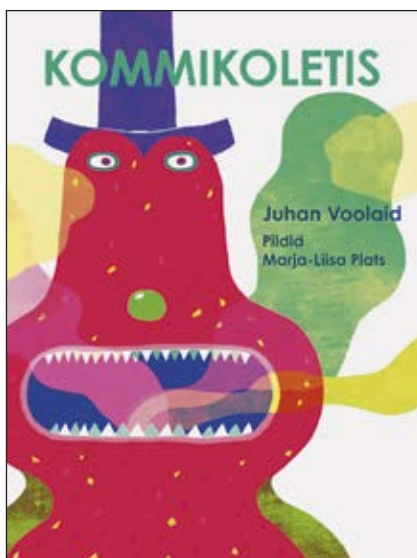
The protagonist is Mirjam, a girl in the rate.ee era whose life is filled with school, MSN, and her older brother's hyper-giga-mega-cool friends. Her fa-

ther no longer lives with them, though it's only mentioned in passing. Adults' tragedies aren't so tragic at all when there are more important going on in your own life.

Mirjam drops a news bomb in only the second chapter: "I take medication all the time, too. A whole handful every day. One of them, called Trexan, is especially awful. I've got to take six at a time and it makes me feel so sick that I just stand there holding the pills in my hand, unable to lift it to my mouth, because my insides are churning." (p. 27) Alarm bells go off in the reader's head: uh-oh, the sweet little girl is sick! The fear spirals if you Google the names of the medicines and diagnose her with an autoimmune disease. Even while addressing illness, *TPWHLFYRC* is bright and cheerful through and through, having no other aim than to explore life through the eyes of a curious young girl.

Mudlum has expressed hope that the book won't seem too old-fashioned to modern-day kids. Nevertheless, this quality is as inevitable as with any historical account. Failure is definite whenever attempting to write a timeless classic, but *TPWHLFYRC* is the fruit of the era portrayed, an early-aughts nostalgia embellished with gorgeous illustrations by Maria-Kristiina Ulas. Perhaps it's also a mother's expression of admiration for a generation of young women; an attempt to understand one's child and what she might have been thinking 20 years ago.

Silvia Urgas (b. 1992) is an Estonian writer and lawyer whose debut poetry collection *Siht/koht* won the 2016 Betti Alver Award.



JUHAN VOOLAID

Kommikoletis

The Candy Monster

Illustrated by Marja-Liisa Plats

Kuuloom OÜ, 2022, 77 pp.

ISBN 9789916984000

Review by Kätlin Vainola

"Waiting is boring. What do you think about taking a spin?" a bicycle suggests at the beginning of the first short story in Juhan Voolaid's collection. It wheels away on a trip around town to pass the time and is soon followed by other denizens, including a police officer who even rests his hand on his gun momentarily (because a talking bike *would* seem dangerous!). Nevertheless, all is well and everyone is happy in the end.

This seems to be a trend in Voolaid's writing—as if the storyteller is sitting next to a drowsy or restless child and pulls the plots out of thin air, adding unexpected twists and turns until they finally reach a climax. The paths readers find themselves upon seem random at first, but turn out to be elegant, humorous, and

well-structured with clear beginnings, middles, and ends, despite the absurd culminations and unusual characters. Altogether, the book comprises 15 stories that are suitable for reading aloud. Among earlier works by the author, who was a Tartu Writer Laureate for a year, is an adventurous tale titled *Stories of Gold Hill*.

The Candy Monster features a wide cast that encompasses candy monsters (naturally, and whom needn't be feared despite their name), a walking fly, a cake that starts out good but turns nasty when it isn't eaten, a long-jumping earthworm, and other fantastical beings.

Many modern-day habits and values surface in Voolaid's stories: when things get exciting, characters tend to pull out their smartphones and start filming. In "The Fly and the Zebra", the former decides to stroll, not fly, across a crosswalk, because it seems like the healthier option. The first drivers to zoom up in apparent road rage regain their composure when they talk to the fly, and ultimately end up walking past the cars themselves.

The main character of "Mr. Robert's Car" is so utterly overwhelmed by our all-too-familiar screen addiction that everything around him crumbles while he sits in front of his computer, oblivious. Ultimately, his broken-down car is accidentally turned into a helicopter at the repair shop, and he manages to forget the glowing rectangles while soaring through the sky. Clearly, Voolaid's stories contain morals and little lessons, though they are never frank or accompanied by finger-wagging. The stories develop simply and logically: kindness and friendliness always tri-



JUHAN VOOLAID / photo Madis Veltman / Scanpix

umph, while ill-willed thoughts and acts never hit their mark.

The stories in *The Candy Monster* weave caring with humor, making you feel so warm inside that a smile will certainly cross your face by the end of every story. Reading it together with a child is especially enjoyable, as laughter erupts from the reader and the listener at different parts of the layered tales.

Marja-Liisa Plats's illustrations are likewise sharp, elegant, and comical. She merrily charms her pencil into sketching the most fun and silly scenes with outgoing characters. Some illustrations are particularly heartwarming, such as one of the little stone-girl Daisy, who takes over Martin's illness and goes to work on a sauna stove. Both the stories and the illustrations are brimming with fantasy—one can expect a child's imagination to be buoyed and perhaps become more inventive of things to do whenever they feel bored. Making up and drawing your own stories is one sure-fire trick.

Kätlin Vainola (b. 1978) is a children's author and Editor-in-Chief of the children's magazine *Hea Laps*.

Kairi Look: An Author Who Treads Boundaries

by Annika A. Koppel

Kairi Look's first children's book, Ville the Lemur Flies the Coop, was published in 2012. The author herself could very well be that lemur, as she left Tallinn years ago to settle in Paris, and later Amsterdam.

Or perhaps it's more correct to say that Look (b. 1983) divides her time between Estonia and the Netherlands. With such frequent travel, airplanes are a necessary mode of transportation between the two capitals, which means many hours spent wandering through airports. And so, perhaps, it is no surprise that Look's debut was followed by another children's book titled *The Airport Bugs Fight On* (2014). After her second book, it wasn't long before Look's bright and busy character Piia Biscuit came to life in what is currently a series of three books: *Piia Biscuit Moves In* (2015), *Piia Biscuit and the Bandits* (2019), and *Piia Biscuit and the Word-Snatcher* (2021). This year, Look published her ninth book: *Herring Disco*, which is likewise populated by odd and unusual characters. Her earlier works have been translated into several other languages: German, Finnish, French, Lithuanian, Latvian, Polish, and Russian.

What kind of a writer is Kairi Look?

"I write the way I live: searching the world for light and believing in freedom, the energy of motion, and openness. I always choose to see hope and solu-

tions, and I admire courage. I honestly believe in a bright tomorrow."

Of course, the world isn't always so rosy.

"I do not cross out sadness when I write. Darkness is no stranger and I am very much drawn to it, to the abyss of the human psyche portrayed in literature. But difficult, grim topics can be addressed with empathy and through a prism of humor. Estonia can be a rather bleak and difficult place to live during the dark months—literature offers an escape and there's a lot you can do with humor. I love absurdity and have a sharp eye for silliness in society. Jokes are a great way to cast light on such things. Kids like how funny and relatable my books are and adults enjoy the finer extra layer."

Although Look graduated in physiotherapy, she imagined herself as a researcher or a health journalist from the very beginning. While completing her master's degree in Amsterdam, she ended up working as a science publisher for a non-fiction publishing house and realized that it's possible to write about many other things.

"I regard Amsterdam as my second home because that's where I started to think that it's all possible. It was easier for me to dream and to believe in those dreams there. I've written many books in that city.

KAIRI LOOK writes for children because it is an unquestioned abode for genuine joy, warmth, and humor / photo Bibi Altink



"I've worked in medicine and publishing, but literature was the path that swept me along immediately and has been dear to me since childhood. A lot of it comes from my great-grandmother, who read to me all the time. She was born in 1903 and lived with us until I was nine. She was very important to me, instilling in me the belief that you can handle anything. Lately, I've been thinking about her and the influence she had on me more and more."

The World can be Made Better

The characters in Look's books are tolerant, open-minded, and curious. They're active and clever, be they lemurs or bed bugs—not to mention Piia Biscuit herself. Piia comes across as an ideal child who sails her way through life. Although her environment is safe and secure, that doesn't mean it's uneventful or free of any danger—there remains much to be resolved.

Look believes that children's books need not be unbreakable, entirely risk-free, or without melancholy because life is not a simple piece of cake and it would be boring if it was. Melancholy is also an appropriate subject. What matters is to offer children a safe, understanding anchor from which they can explore, discover, and get a little wild.

The author doesn't dwell upon morals when writing for younger audiences. She's neither a parent nor a teacher. Rather, she aims to encourage children to forge connections with the world around them. "I treat kids as equals and try to impart the belief that they have the power to change things, especially in light of our modern-day climate crisis; where the world is going off-kilter."

Look believes there's an opportunity to see good in every difficult situation and that there's no need to play the victim or

surrender helplessly to the way things are. Dialogue is a useful tool. "If you look at kids, then they possess an openness and the ability for expressive communication from birth. As adults, we sometimes tend to become rigid, generalizing, and analytical. But, at the end of the day, we're polyphonic human beings. Courage to be vulnerable opens a door to the human soul, to dialogue, to connecting in depth."

She writes whenever the impulse comes calling, which means not just every day. But when she does (and for her, writing is an innate practice), then it's a natural flow and a reflection of her values and convictions. She's fond of children's literature because it is an unquestioned abode for genuine joy, warmth, and humor. It's where she feels at home as well.

Still, Look wouldn't be herself if she were limited to only one genre and, lately, she's been writing more short fiction and literary reviews. Having received a three-year Estonian writer's salary, Look is using the opportunity to focus exclusively on writing. Next up is a full-length novel for adults.

"I'd like to write a little differently for kids, too. These three years are for experimentation. In the future, I'll definitely do something aside from writing—I'm too curious to sit at a desk all day. I mean, where else will I get subject matter for writing, anyway?"

At the Intersection of Three Languages

Living in several different countries gives you a whole new perspective. For instance, one might refrain from making hasty judgements or defining themselves or others with a single label such as "writer". The world is a complex and dynamic place that is rich in its diversity.

Although Look lives at the intersection of three languages—Estonian, Dutch, and English—she finds it very

important to write in Estonian. She's also translated several Dutch children's books into her native language, including works by Annie M. G. Schmidt and Annet Schaap.

"Translating presents a lot of challenges; it teaches you things and helps you to develop. Working in Dutch and being a conduit for Estonian and Dutch culture are things I truly enjoy. Annie G. Schmidt and I share a similar style, so translating her work was easy. Annet Schaap is more lyrical and poetic, which meant more difficulty but also excitement."

Look has never met a child who doesn't like being read to or told a story. If children read literature that they enjoy, then it's likely they'll continue reading into adulthood. You just have to find the right book. Illustrations are in no way trivial, either.

The author's books have been illustrated by Elina Sildre, Kirke Kangro, Marge Nelk, Kaspar Jancis, and Ulla Saar. As an author, she usually refrains from interfering in the artists' work. Look has developed a close mutual understanding with Saar, who has brought the author's colorful characters to life while adding a dose of her own humor. Saar's contributions include the Piia Biscuit books and *Herring Disco*.

"Illustrations craft a whole world around a book. Ulla prizes openness, tolerance, and curiosity, just like I do. My books have many unique characters who are all a little bizarre, though they each have the right to stay themselves. The way Ulla commits them to paper is amazing. In the future we will surely create picture books together, where the synergy between the author and illustrator is especially crucial."

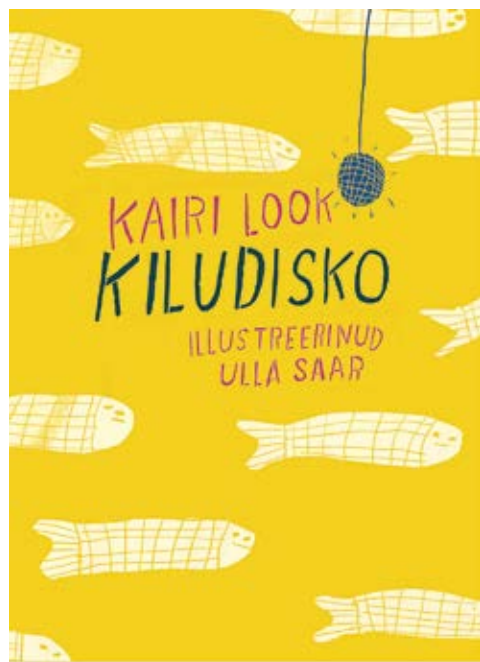
As someone who walks boundaries, Look values freedom and living however the heart desires.

"I don't belong to just any one place, and I like treading boundaries. I feel very much Nordic and love Estonia, but I also appreciate the anonymity that Amsterdam offers, its openness and diversity. I believe that the world is a better place when we try to understand each other and are able to preserve a plurality of opinions, show our vulnerability, and seek for connection. I believe in joy, hope, power of curiosity, and a bright tomorrow where also our darkness can reside. Life is always worth living."

Annika Koppel (b. 1964) is the editor-in-chief of *Estonian Literary Magazine*.

KAIRI LOOK **Herring Disco** **Kiludisko**

Illustrated by Ulla Saar
Puänt, 2023, 112 pp.
ISBN 9789916968291



Recent Translations



CROATIAN

A. H. TAMMSAARE

Põrgupõhja uus Vanapagan

Novi vrag u selu

Translated by Boris Vidović

Published by Fraktura, 2023

328 pp.



DUTCH

REIN RAUD

Täiusliku lause surm

De dood van de perfecte zin

Translated by Frans van Nes

Published by Pegasus Uitgeverij, 2023

200 pp.



KAI AARELEID

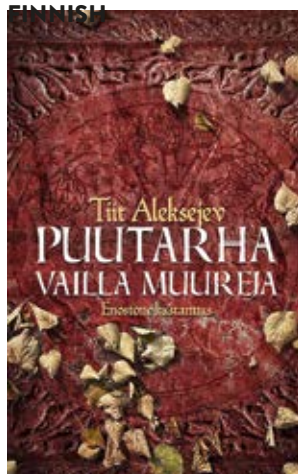
Vaikne ookean

Tyyni valtameri

Translated by Outi Hytönen

Published by S&S, 2023

308 pp.



FINNISH

TIIT ALEKSEJEV

Müürideta aed

Puutarha vailla muureja

Translated by Hannu Oittinen

Published by Enostone, 2023

204 pp.



GERMAN

URMAS VADI

Ballettmeister

Der Ballettmeister

Translated by Cornelius Hasselblatt

Published by Rote Katze, 2023

288 pp.



HUNGARIAN

JAAN KAPLINSKI

Ma vaatasin päikese aknasse

Benéztem a Nap ablakán. Válogatott versek

Translated by Béla Jávorszky

Published by Magyar Napló Kiadó, 2023

168 pp.



INARI SÁMI

MEHIS HEINSAAR

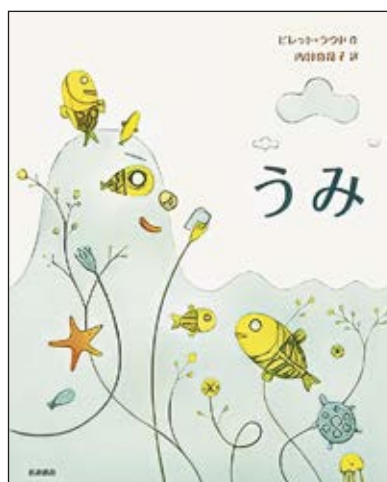
Härra Pauli kroonikad

Hiärrä Paavväl äigikirjeh

Translated by Jukka Mettovaara

Published by Anaräškielä servi, 2023

122 pp.



JAPANESE

PIRET RAUD

Meri

うみ

Translated by Yayako Uchida

Published by Iwanami Shoten, 2023

31 pp.

**LATVIAN**

REIN RAUD

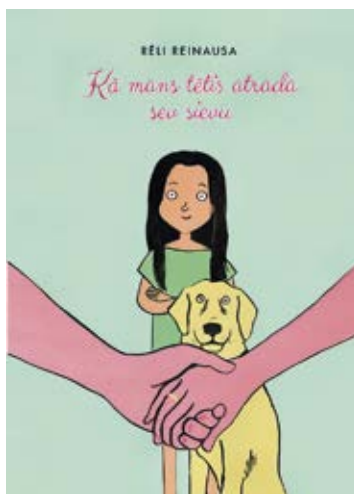
Pāikesekiri

Saulesraksts

Translated by Maima Grīnberga

Published by Jānis Roze, 2023

416 pp.

**LATVIAN**

REELI REINAUS

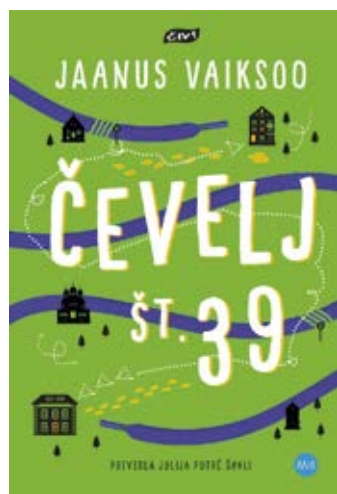
Kuidas mu isa endale uue naise sai

Kā mans tētis atrada sev sievu

Translated by Daila Ozola

Published by Zvaigzne ABC, 2023

192 pp.

**SLOVENIAN**

JAANUS VAIKSOO

King nr 39

Čevelj št. 39

Translated by Julija Potrč Šavli

Published by Miš, 2023

212 pp.

**UKRAINIAN**

FANTASY ANTHOLOGY: Manfred Kalmsten, Joel Jans, Indrek Hargla, Veiko Belials, Meelis Friedenthal, Siim Veskimees, Mann Loper, Heinrich Weinberg, Maniakkide Tänav, Jaagup Mahkra.

Edited by Raul Sulbi

Merevaiguvalgus

Бурштинове сяйво

Translated by Irena Peterson-Pavljuk, Katja Novak,

Jevgenia Starodub, Sofia Bregman

Published by Vydavnytstvo, 2023

308 pp.



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