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Paavo Matsin's performances

by Jan Kaus

I last saw Paavo Matsin (1970) at a museum that honors the Estonian literary classic Eduard Vilde, where we were both scheduled to speak. We chatted shortly before taking the stage, and I suddenly noticed the tattoos on Paavo's hands, tattoos I didn't remember him having before. One caricature stood out most: a barrel-shaped man wearing a striped shirt and checkered pants with suspenders, an impressive shock of curly hair sprouting from his forehead, crowned by a miniature cap. Coming from the figure's mouth was a speech bubble containing the famous words: "*Adjöö, musjöö!*" [1]

I recognized Ponchik immediately! Ponchik and Babyface: legendary "bad boys", led by the infamous Count. True, the Count later became a law-abiding businessman, while Ponchik and Babyface unfortunately stayed true to their criminal habits, and received the punishment they deserved.

To explain, for those entirely confused by the above: Ponchik, Babyface, and the Count were characters in one of the most-loved Estonian comics series of all time, the author of which was the caricaturist Olimar Kallas (1929–2006). It was not a "series" in the Western sense, as Kallas published only eight of his "*Kiviküla*" ("Stone Village") comics. The first book in the "Stone Village" series, *3 Stories*, was published in 1979 – back when both Paavo and I were children. Kallas can be regarded as a cult author, and it isn't hard to determine why his fan base includes so many contemporary writers: the "Stone Village" comics were not merely well-drawn, but also skillfully worded. I know more Kallas quotes by heart than I do those of Estonia's literary classics. Oh, what joy it is to cite the Count when another character angrily asks him: "Are you a chunk of ice or a person?" "Neither, unfortunately – I'm the Count!"

But why discuss this here at such length? I should be speaking of Paavo Matsin, not Olimar Kallas, and I should be addressing Matsin's writing, not his tattoos. However, the Ponchik tattoo on Matsin's arm speaks worlds not only about his personality, but also about his creative works. Not every man has a marginal literary character

1 *"Adieu, monsieur!" – Translator*

PAAVO MATSIN · PHOTO BY PRIIT MÜRK / MÜÜRILEHT

PHOTO BY MARGUS ANSU / SCANPIX

BLESSING OF THE COAT OF ARMS OF STUDENT CORPORATION FRATERNITAS LIVIENSIS BY PAAVO MATSIN AND ANTS TOOMING

etched into his skin, and this was not only a conscious act, but part of an agenda. First of all, one can't deny that Matsin himself somewhat resembles Ponchik in appearance. Similarly, the "bad boy" metaphor certainly applies to him in the context of Estonian literature. Matsin's literary success is at least partially due to the fact that he stays voluntarily at the margins. He is an author who disregards the rules and tells them "Adieu, monsieur!", and much more successfully than Ponchik.

There is another factor. It is often difficult to determine where Matsin's everyday life ends and where literature begins, at what point the fireworks of fantasy will burst out above the ordinary. His transitions from one to the other are fluid. Life transforms into theater in Matsin's hands, even without the scenery. He proved this well that time at the Eduard Vilde Museum. We had been invited to interpret one of Vilde's most well-known novels, *The Milkman of Mäeküla* (*Mäeküla piimamees*, 1916), which is regarded as a cornerstone of Estonian psychological realism. Matsin began by saying that he finds realism boring. He was the only speaker who refused the museum's request to give an interpretation of the classic's work. Instead, Matsin told colorful tales about when he himself worked at the Vilde Museum. They sounded both credible and incredible, once again proving to me that Matsin lives a style in which the transition from reality to imaginary is neither abrupt nor unambiguous. Life can be more vivid than fantasy, and thus life itself can be told as fantasy. At the same time, a good fantasy can revivify life: – take for example the early years of Matsin' literary activity. The author was a member

of the avant-garde literary group 14NÜ, which released outlandish publications, including their "strip books", which experimented with the limits and opportunities for expression offered by both books and language. 14NÜ was a motley crew: in addition to Matsin, it included the internationally renowned animated film director Mait Laas, and Maarja Vaino, who is now the director of the A. H. Tammsaare Museum. Also in its ranks was a long-dead author: Johannes Üksi (1891–1937), a marginal poet of the early 20th century. But possibly the most interesting member of 14NÜ was Marianne Ravi. To this day, I am unsure whether Ravi is a real person or a phantom from the brains of Matsin & Co; still, she was credited as authoring one of the group's "strip books". When I hypothesized in an essay that Ravi is a figment of the imagination, Matsin and Laas tried with all their might to prove to me that she exists. It turned out that Marianne Ravi works at an Italian television station. I was given a videocassette to watch. What I viewed was, to put it mildly, a clip of a bizarre weather forecast. Standing next to a map of Italy was a stunningly gorgeous nude blonde woman, whose vagina, belly, and nipples were covered by a sun and various clouds. As a vivacious voice reported the weather, the woman started removing the clouds and sun from her body, one by one, and attaching them to the map. That weather girl wearing a brilliant smile was apparently Marianne Ravi. Additionally, I was sent a photograph of a young woman seated between Matsin and Laas at a café, giggling into a glass of juice. Written in Italian on the back of the picture was: "To my dear Jan. Marianne." Despite all this evidence (or thanks to it), I like to think that Marianne Ravi really was imagined by Paavo Matsin and Mait Laas.

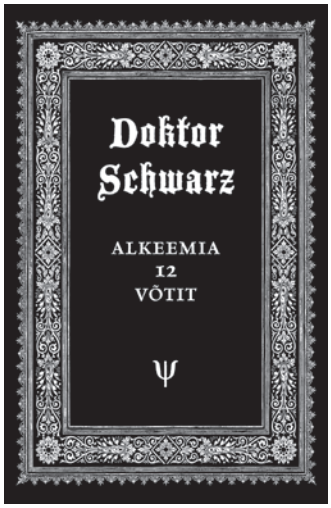
The Marianne "case" remains indicative of Matsin's works, although the author has now shifted away from his somewhat rowdy genre games and come significantly closer to traditional forms of written expression. I miss 14NÜ's unusual book presentations, for one thing. At the presentation of Matsin's experimental work *Aabits* (ABCs, 2000), for instance, a gymnast wearing a white unitard performed various exercises while a Catholic prayer was read. It was not a presentation, but something much broader: the event gave literature a performative dimension, transforming it into a surrealist effort of sweat and strained muscles. It was the most theatrical presentation I've ever seen, a performance whose participants were anything but ordinary. Marianne Ravi and her little tufts of clouds can also be regarded as participants in an absurd, stimulating performance staged by Matsin himself.

Perhaps it would be useful to characterize everything Matsin does as performances, including his novels. Matsin's book covers are stage curtains, behind which words and motifs create a mise en scène that would do honor to even the most avant-garde Theater of the Absurd. His books are performances of perception punctuated by the dented trumpets of forgotten rituals, mysterious hand organs, and rat-catchers' pipes. Matsin is ideally suited to be the director of a magical theater, behind a mirror or around a dark corner, one that is both cozy and labyrinthine. His performers could include breathing mummies and a disintegrating God, like in the peculiar house in Ingmar Bergman's film Fanny and Alexander. Matsin's works are an orchestrated spree of free-form associations.

LAUNCH OF *DOCTOR SCHWARZ* IN TALLINN WITH AN ALCHEMIC CEREMONY · PHOTO BY OLAVI HEINLO

But what is the source of these free-form associations? The title of Matsin's first novel is explanation enough: *Doctor Schwarz. The 12 Keys to Alchemy* (*Doktor Schwarz. Alkeemia 12 võtit*, 2011). As one might guess, Matsin utilizes in the text his thorough knowledge of the occult and alchemy, as well as everything associated with the two. In 2003, he defended his thesis "Carl Gustav Jung and Alchemy" at the Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church's Theological Institute, and he is also a great fan of the works of Gustav Meyrink. *Doctor Schwarz*, however, does not merely describe alchemy; the text itself is a kind of symbolic alchemy, taking the traditional forms of storytelling and attempting to achieve something new by mixing and transforming them. In the same way that alchemy used elements of chemistry, physics, astrology, medicine, art, and mysticism, so Matsin takes various means of literary expression and conjures a new quality out of them. In a review of Matsin's work, the critic Meelis Oidsalu wrote: "*Doctor Schwarz* [appears to be], among other things, an attempt to create a textual substance that is purified of the 'traditional' story-, character-, and plot-based literary perception; one that spotlights the archetypal relationships between author, literature, and reader." Literature abruptly breaks out into dance and the stage spins, exposing odd rituals. Rabbits and angels holding up tarot cards leap out of the theater director's hat (which is also his head). This could all be classified as postmodernist, but something prevents me from doing so. The price of the viewer's birth in Matsin's textual theater is the author's life, not his death. More simply put: you can't really understand anything, but it's spectacular!

Matsin's second novel *The Blue Guard* (*Sinine kaardivägi*, 2013) moves towards a more traditional style of storytelling. The stage is set in Riga, the largest city in the Baltic States, among its grandiose architecture. Both historical and mystical elements set off the book's chain of nail-biting events. One important setting is the apartment-museum of Aleksandrs Čaks (1901–1950), one of Latvia's most renowned progressive urban poets, whose works were long



SELECTION OF PAAVO MATSIN'S BOOKS

BOOK LAUNCHES OF *THE GOGOL DISCO* IN BURSSELS, VILJANDI, KĀSMU, TARTU AND TALLINN · PHOTOS BY ANNIKA MÄNDMAA, KRISTJAN MÄNDMAA, DMITRI KOTJUH, ROBERTA BALDUZZI / EUPL

banned in the Soviet Union. In the novel, a clash breaks out between the "baggypants" (a reference to the proletariat, but it could also be to modern liberalism) of Riga's outer neighborhoods and the semi-legendary, slightly aristocratic Blue Guard, a militant volunteer unit of Riga residents, which is known to haunt St. Peter's Church in the city's Old Town. The Blue Guard's association with a university fraternity is a nod to Matsin's second greatest topic of interest, after alchemy: Freemasonry. None of this should be taken too seriously, of course. Matsin's performance is always speckled with comic motifs, one very conspicuous proof of which is that he adapted his own name as author to a Latvianized version: Pāvs Matsins. This is also the name of the book's narrator, who works at the Čaks Memorial Apartment. Still, Matsin doesn't refrain from furthering his own cause in The Blue Guard, i.e. keeping alive the belief that a mental and creative alchemical style founded on foolhardy experiments and free association is an important tool to prevent intellectual assimilation. The performance not only centers on Matsin: it happens within him – in his head and his imagination – and the opportunity to allow our fantasy to flow freely and uninhibited (as well as to take part in this performance) is more important than we can ever understand.

Matsin's third book, *The Gogol Disco* (*Gogoli disko*, 2015), turned out to be a breakthrough for the author: it received both the Cultural Endowment of Estonia's Award for Literature and the EU Prize for Literature, and reached the top-ten list at Estonian bookstores. A few of Matsin's more avant-garde calling cards, such as a cryptic plot and intertextuality that is impenetrable to the layman, continue to

***THE GOGOL DISCO* DISCO IN VILJANDI UGALA THEATRE IN 2016** · PHOTO BY KALEV LILLEORG / KROONIKA / ÕHTULEHT

VILJANDI · PHOTO BY KRISTJAN MÄNDMAA

recede in the work, although elements of his textual performance are amplified that much more powerfully: a bizarre, dream-like atmosphere, an abundance of colorful characters and situations, and the carnival of fantasy they work together to create. Matsin does write linearly in *The Gogol Disco*, but does not shed his talent of conjuring a unique world that is magical and grotesque, one that refuses to yield to classification, e.g. in terms of genre. The novel tells of a near future (or a parallel present), in which Imperial Russia has put an end to Estonian independence, and Estonians themselves have dwindled to a scant minority in their homeland. However, the work is not centered on national apocalypse. It focuses instead on a visit by the literary classic Nikolai Gogol – raised from the dead – to Matsin's tiny, picturesque hometown of Viljandi. There, the writer invigorates the local intellectual scene, and on several occasions flips it upside-down. Nevertheless, Gogol – in whose depiction Matsin seems to have taken inspiration from Jesus, Woland, and Golem – is not necessarily the main character of *The Gogol Disco*. At center stage is a diverse gallery of mainly Russian-speaking local intellectuals and servants, whose already odd lives intersect with and are permanently transformed by that of the parable-mumbling Golem/Gogol. The setting of *The Gogol Disco* could be called a gamboling dystopia, or even a parody of a dystopia. In another respect, one could say it is parabolically grotesque. In any case, Matsin's soaring imagination leaves most other Estonian fantasy writers shuffling, with both feet planted firmly on flat lands.

It certainly must be mentioned that *The Gogol Disco* possesses a clear bonus: the both typical and exceptional small Estonian town of Viljandi, which the author depicts with the same degree of affection as he does Riga in *The Blue Guard*. I pass through Viljandi frequently, seeing as how my summer cottage is located nearby. One of my favorite places in the town is a tiny, cozy antique store on Lossi Street, the type of place where you can tangibly feel time slowing down, or even stopping. I was nearly ecstatic when I saw that Matsin had made it one of the novel's primary settings: two simple rooms packed full of books. The author's description of the shop, and of the town as a whole, is both humorous and accurate. In some ways, Viljandi is entirely recognizable, while in others it clearly comes from Matsin's restless imagination: more likely than not, Estonia, with its declining population, will never see trams in towns the size of Viljandi. But if trams were to run there, they would certainly fit in. Thus, the Viljandi of *The Gogol Disco* is strange and familiar at the same time. The authenticity of the setting and the bizarreness of the events that unfold there could lead one to classify Matsin's work as magical realism; however, the images Matsin conjures are too restive, the sense of liberty surging from his books too powerful, and his performance too diverse in nature to be limited to such a definition.

At that same literary evening in the Vilde Museum, Matsin remarked that he had spent time at an artists' and writers' house abroad to write his newest, fourth novel. The protagonists of this forthcoming book are not people, but birds: storks, to be exact. During his creative residency, Matsin discovered that the cheapest food at the nearest supermarket was grilled chicken. And so, Matsin told me how he wrote about storks and ate chicken for days on end. I envisioned him sitting in his room, the tattoo of Ponchik on his arm, every corner of the space piled high with chicken bones, and a stunning array of storks before him: big and little, black and white, male and female. The image could have come straight out of one of Matsin's own books. There is a truly Beckett-like atmosphere to the scene as I imagine it. What could this mean? Doubtless that if you speak with Paavo Matsin, he will make you, suspecting or not, a part of one of his countless performances.

The Gogol Disco

by Paavo Matsin · Excerpt translated by Adam Cullen

Cutlets for Gogol

Katerina had been crying over Grigory's disappearance the entire day, alone downstairs. She finally pulled herself together, went back to work around midnight (despite Opiatovich having forbidden her to do so), discovered the bar door ajar, and spotted Gogol in the park at the street corner, sleeping in the moonlight. She briefly returned to the bar to clean up, then borrowed a wheelbarrow from the yard of the courthouse across the street—the rare ethnically-Estonian caretaker there mostly used it to collect fallen shards of red shingle. Then, Katerina determinedly wheeled the unusually- and conspicuously-dressed Gogol back to her home. Late-night smokers loitering outside the nightclub shouted catcalls at her and the wheelbarrow, but Katerina was accustomed to troublesome customers and ignored them. Gogol had to be taken to a safe place. The horrendous cobblestones that the new tsardom had pounded into place in its very first days joggled the wheelbarrow, so Katerina removed her soft, rose-patterned shawl and positioned it under the moaning Gogol's back.

Once home, she started making cutlets in the early-morning gloaming—more to soothe her nerves than out of hunger. Katerina had put high hopes in Grigory. He had promised her the Sun and the Moon, had even moved his bags into her apartment, but had now disappeared all the same, and did so in such a rush that he hadn't even flushed the downstairs toilet! Grigory spent an odd amount of time in the bathroom in general, and even took a mug with him, as if he intended to drink the flush-water! Good Lord! Maybe he'd had some strange disease? Or bloody urine? It was too bad that everything went the way it did, of course… but positive that at least some kind of male soul had entered the house again! Furthermore, Katerina felt an inexplicable fondness for the taciturn prophet—Gogol had eaten his meals at Novel Bar ravenously and spoken words that pierced straight through to her heart; long-awaited answers to the woman's greatest questions. And he never spoke in those awful threefold idioms! Katerina felt inexplicable thrill and dignity. A pop song kept repeating in her head, for some reason—one about a beautiful woman who lived in a riverside house, beneath which a crystal-clear stream started flowing one fine day. She

was also reminded of the Gospels—in the end, only women were left at the foot of the Redeemer's cross, because all the men fled!

The cutlets turned out fantastically. The great Gogol ate sedately and in silence—like an old engraving come to life, which suddenly, glimpsed by a late-night bathroom-goer in the wrong light, appears to be moving. When Katerina offered him wine, the stranger pointed to the kettle and had her top off the glass with warm water. She noticed the man had a strange habit of molding his bread into little balls. What's more—all the the windows and mirrors had to be covered. When they arrived and she gave Gogol, who was shivering, a dress shirt that Grigory left behind, the prophet stared out into the darkness of night for a long while, muttering something about his last home, the windows of which were always covered in mud because of the carriages that turned around in front of it. Gogol tugged at the window shade and Katerina granted his strange wish, shutting each one. Thus, when the bloodied and clearly deranged Grigory showed up, it was a neighbor who called the asylum, and all Katerina could do was watch from the balcony above as the man, from whom she had hoped for so much, was taken away in a blue van. Katerina started feeling chilly, so she went back inside to sit and doze off next to Gogol, who was fast asleep. She hadn't the slightest clue how she would move forward with her shattered life. After a while, Katerina awoke and reached out to touch Gogol—his hands were as cold as ice and his face was covered in small scratches, probably as a result of his death mask; the woman hoped to treat the tiny wounds in the morning with a good Yugoslavian spikenard. Her guest also woke up once that night, and—in what appeared to be a sleepwalking state—attempted to clamber upstairs, where he claimed the home chapel was! Gogol howled in his sleep a couple of times, calling out for his servant, but seemed to exhaust himself, and fell back into a deep slumber. After breakfast, Gogol wanted to spend the day in the toilet, as he was accustomed to doing, and Katerina did not deny him that small eccentricity—where else was the dead man supposed to go, anyway? She even brought him a few ballpoint pens and scraps of notebook paper. A couple Estonian-language works of literature — *Rise and Shine* by an older author named Jaan Kaus, and a thick book titled *Epic Story of Tartu* by the Estonian-Nigerian Nobelist Berk Vakri—were leaning on a birch-wood shelf in the bathroom. They were there for not reading, just as the imperial decree prescribed for literature penned by the departed Estonians: at least two books from the list were to be kept in spaces for tending to hygiene, always. Luckily, Gogol said they were too difficult for him… Katerina didn't want any trouble. She lived a quiet life and abided by all national laws—they were so instilled into her that she even mentally weighed out her homemade cutlets using the state gram-standard and, it goes without saying, strictly adhered to the "blue decrees", which regulated relationships with any remnants or representatives of the former Estonian state.

Katerina had invited a guest over the next evening. Her girlfriends were indeed her sole pleasure in life. The closest of them—Katya—worked as the director of two factories situated relatively far from each other, so she paid her soul-sister frequent visits, if only for the purely practical purpose of having somewhere to stay the night. However, the unexpected development dissolved Katerina's ecstatic anticipation. She hadn't said a word to Katya about Gogol

yet, and intended to serve the news-bomb on a cart that she could "wheel in", so to say; but as always, something started to burn in the kitchen at the busiest moment. Katya was left alone in the entryway, and her shrill scream immediately rang out as she discovered a skeletal old man from beyond the grave reading mandatory toilet literature on the john. Toilet books were always stocked everywhere by law, but no one ever picked them up! Now, Katya was gripped by the feeling she would die a gruesome death today, somewhere on a park bench where the committee of local pickpockets gathered in the bushes poking through the eerie ruins on Castle Hill! That was how horrible the phantom appeared! The disgusting and illegal act—reading an Estonian book in the bathroom—was so unbelievable that the strawberry cake she had bought from the confectionary slipped from her grasp and hit the ground with a plop.

Yet, all three eventually collected themselves, and life's unexpectedly hot broth cooled when later, Katerina asked the stranger to emerge and Gogol, clad in raspberry-red pants, offered the women papirosi from his squeaky cigarette case with trembling gallantry. Katya knew that Katerina always possessed a certain hidden and elusive class; probably a result of her Baltic heritage. With her friend by her side, the situation even seemed exciting—Katya had never seen such a fascinating man where she worked; even the IT guy wasn't on par with Gogol, though he similarly dressed unusually and spoke gibberish. Katya stared in wide-eyed wonder as Katerina fetched her most treasured spikenard from the bedroom and rubbed it on the old man's legs. The whole room smelled pungently like a church. Katya inspected the ointment's box and was incredulously speechless—it cost almost her yearly salary. Katerina's hair even brushed across the ointment as she leaned over Gogol, but the woman didn't care. For a moment, it seemed as if Katya's friend was downright scrubbing the phantom's brown, rotting feet with her hair. Katerina lastly applied the ointment to Gogol's face, apparently to treat the small cuts made by his death mask.

"Why on Earth are you using such expensive ointment on him?" Katya asked Katerina as soon as they were alone in the kitchen for a moment. "You can't live with an old man like him, you know—he won't bring home the bacon... Wouldn't you like a long-distance trucker? I could arrange it—I've told you before..."

Katerina sat down at the kitchen table and started to cry.

"Look, he's only going to be here for a short while, but those other men are around all the time," she sighed when she regained her composure. "I just started feeling sorry for him—he's a total *nemodny-unitaz-parasite*[1], of course, but Grisha disappeared and I don't have it in me to start over again..."

"Yeah, but you really can't live with someone like him, Katerinka," Katya said, her face now bathed in the glow of the inner lamp of feminine astonishment. "You could feed a regular man for a good three hundred days with the money spent on that ointment! He's no Christ, now is he?! And we're not Jewish women! And on top of that, if the inspectors come and see him reading, then no one will be able to protect you anymore—you're an *Estonka*[2]. Do you want to be hauled off to the old metro to die, too?"

1 *unfashionable-toilet-parasite (Russian)*

2 *Estonian [woman] (Russian)*

"The metro?..." Katerina exclaimed. "I've served the tsardom honestly my whole life—I've never even read *newspapers* in the bathroom..."

She cried like a prostitute or a train-station pianist. Oh, how dearly she needed a Grigory in her life—a little *aranzhirovchik*[3] of everyday affairs, who would tell her what is good and what is bad, and what the point of life is; who would put the right tone on things and always pull a suitable sum of money out from under the piano cover! Now, her entire life was a mess again, just like France Boulevard in Pskov after its opening ceremony.

Katya tried to think businesslike for a moment, just like she did at the factory whenever the workmen came around to gripe about not having this or that. She would ordinarily have all of them display their tools to her, after which they'd realize there was actually no basis for demanding extra, and that all the right conditions for drudgery had been established. Katya attempted to formulate her developing viewpoint:

"There has got to be some place that's safer and better for him. There's nothing wrong with your place, of course—this is worlds beyond a communal apartment. But listen, Katerinka—what do you say we take him to the museum?"

Katerina leapt to her feet, her eyes glinting strangely, like a house's last night-light tossed into a pond.

"Yes!" she exclaimed after a minute-long silence, her voice cracking.

The women composed themselves and returned to the living room. Gogol had gone into the toilet again, and all the bread on the table had been molded into little balls. The two friends began quietly packing what they would need.

3 *organizer (Russian)*

Indrek Koff – intuitively in-between modes of expression

INDREK KOFF (1975) is one of the most fascinating Estonian authors of the last decade. His writing stands out for its experimentation, the author's talent for finding intriguing genre opportunities, and his methodical accomplishment of them. Koff can certainly be regarded as a poet, a children's author, and a translator, but a noteworthy part of his writing shifts between different genres.

Koff first embarked on his literary journey as a translator in the early 2000s. He has translated into Estonian an impressive amount of primarily French-language prose and philosophy: perhaps his most popular translated work in Estonia is Michel Houellebecq's The Elementary Particles. Koff started on his own writing much later, and thus his lyric poetry debut, *Vana Laul* (An Old Song, 2006), stands out for its exceptional maturity. In the book, Koff applied, for the first time, his now recurring method of binding individual poetic texts to a particular motif or technique. Koff's fame soared with his book *Eestluse elujõust* (On the Energy of Estonian Essence, 2010). Strictly speaking, the work does not contain a single one of Koff's own words, but is composed of commonplace Estonian sayings and expressions. The author collected these everyday sayings, compiled them into a "hysterical treatise", and ended up creating something unexpectedly scintillating. Koff continued his literary experiments in 2012 with the book *Asjaõigusest* (On Property Law), which he produced in collaboration with the writer Jan Kaus and "Raido Mürk", by all assumptions a fictional character. *Mürk* (Estonian for "poison") is a misanthrope who lives on the fringes of the capital, drinks expensive wine, and catches flies with his tongue. No one has ever captured him on film. In 2016, after writing a string of successful children's books, Koff made a return to experimental literature, simultaneously releasing two unusual works with clearly different constructions: *Saja rahva lood* (Stories of a Hundred Nations) and *Poeem* (A Long Poem). These two books provide more than enough reason to probe Koff's approach and method in greater detail.

***Estonian Literary Magazine*: One could say that with your new books, the poetry collection *A Long Poem* and the short-prose collection *Stories of a Hundred Nations*, you have moved forward in your own particular, experimental method, subjecting the individual texts to a thematic perspective or formulaic technique. *A Long Poem*'s title could be seen as**

INDREK KOFF · PHOTO BY KARLI SAUL/SCANPIX

misleading, but only partly, since each of the collection's individual texts addresses the very same topic: the ridiculousness and tribulations of being a writer. How and why did you arrive at this topic, i.e. writing about literature?

Indrek Koff: I have to disappoint you: I honestly don't know how I arrived at the topic, just like I don't have the slightest clue how I ever arrive at any of my topics. My books (or at least every book's initial concept, its launching point) tend to arise on their own. The case with *A Long Poem* is simple, in a way. I live rather deep in the world of writers: I myself write, translate, and verbally convey the written word on stage. I've blended with writing: it's become my "natural habitat". However, it's all gone somehow unintentionally, and even *against* my intentions. In truth, I'm extremely happy that I haven't drowned in the written world for good – that I come into contact with real life in addition to books, and that I encounter people from entirely different walks of life who have entirely different joys and woes. Generally, poems in which the poet writes about writing poetry tend to annoy me. And now, it turns out that I've fallen into the same trap myself, and on top of that, without limiting myself to lone texts, but writing a whole book of it at once… In my own eyes, I'm excused by the fact that in *A Long Poem* I don't bring up any personal or imagined character's convictions. Instead, I simply try to create a kind of space inhabited by the gazes of many eyes and the thoughts of many minds. A space that is by no means exhaustive, closed, or complete, but rather one where movement can continue until it inevitably ceases due to the the laws of physics.

While *A Long Poem* might still be viewed as a traditional poetry collection, *Stories of a Hundred Nations* is difficult to define by genre. Perhaps it is short prose? In that case, one could immediately ask: what kind of short prose? I tend to see your own clear signature in it. You take a literary motif or a method of wording something – in this case, a fairy-tale summary or an introduction to a fairy tale – and start playing it out in every conceivable way. By that logic, *Stories of a Hundred Nations* is a sequel to your 2010 book *On the Energy of Estonian Essence*, in which you played with sayings that circulate through the Estonian population. What is it about focusing on a definite motif or a literary method that fascinates you? Why is nudging the limits of genre or ducking between them so important to you?

If I may, then I'd answer with the same words: I don't know. But I realize I should try to expand a little on that. To start with, I'd like to make clear that I don't see myself as a revolutionary who is trying to make the world order teeter by stretching the limits of a genre. It'd be extremely naïve to believe that I'm capable of discovering something completely new, and have furthermore accomplished it in my art. No, of course I don't harbor any such illusions. But I have started to feel that thinking one topic at a time as I do, and the "comprehensive" view that has somehow inadvertently become my method both derive from peculiarities of my mental makeup. The same approach has been used in foreign-language literature, and there are quite a few similar works that I've enjoyed thoroughly. A couple of years ago, I was given Padgett Powell's novel-like

work *The Interrogative Mood: A Novel?*, which is composed exclusively of questions. I liked it a lot, above all, of course, because the author's daring work didn't remain merely that, but instead rose to the level of a work of art: the experiment had borne fruit, just as intended.

Psycho- and other types of analysts could naturally offer other explanations: ranging from a father figure (or what have you) to a subconscious fear of established genres. I truly have thought, for example, that I would never be able to write a genuine novel. I simply couldn't manage. The poems that I sometimes, rarely, produce individually (i.e. not as parts of a greater whole from the very beginning) aren't all that good when viewed as classical poems. I've given consideration to writing short stories, but haven't had the courage or the time to undertake any yet. Et cetera. When a new thought pops into my mind and I notice that once again it wants to take textual shape as some unusual form that is difficult to define by genre, then I'd like to believe it simply had to manifest in that way. But no doubt that "fear" and a hundred other explanations exist and are valid somewhere, even if just faintly. You never know.

In your books, readers come across quite a lot of existential (self-)irony, the modern man's sour gaze, social nerve. You've quoted Muriel Barbery, whose work *The Elegance of the Hedgehog* is also available in Estonian thanks to your translation: "We are animals subject to the cold determinism of physical phenomena." A similar attitude can be found in your works: sometimes they're worded very playfully, and even cheerfully, and other times more thoughtfully and even melancholically. Since you started out as a translator, have you considered the degree to which your works and mindset have been influenced by the writers you've translated (such as Michel Houellebecq)? Or do your influences tend to come foremost from Estonian literature?

Now here, I'm going to have some trouble answering. I'm not much of an interpreter as a reader, a translator, or a writer; rather, I always function almost completely intuitively. On occasion, when there's no other option (i.e. when I have to give a talk or answer questions, such as right now), I manage to distance from myself a little, and then some kind of an idea or something akin to an analysis might filter through; but that happens rarely and, to tell the truth, I'm not sure I like it. Essentially, I'm a typical representative of a deeply pessimistic world view, due to which I have an affinity for such authors as Cioran and Houellebecq (whose books do, however, contain a strange, backwards optimism). But on the other hand, I'm a romantic. I can sometimes even drift towards sentimentality (and then, my editors have to hold me back with all their might, as they did quite successfully with *Poem* and *Stories of a Hundred Nations*). I have an incredible weakness for the works of several Jewish writers, and some inexplicable force draws me towards Portugal and its culture. Unfortunately, though, I can't comment on whether or how much all of that has influenced my writing. I tend to believe that it's the literary experts' job to notice and analyze those influences: they're much better prepared for it, and they do it better.

TRANSLATOR INDREK KOFF RECEIVING FRENCH ORDER OF ARTS AND LITERATURE

PHOTO BY MIHKEL MARIPUU / SCANPIX

I could, however, certainly name a few translated works that have had a strong influence on me as a reader, ones that have clung to me and just won't seem to let go. Claude Lévi-Strauss' *Sad Tropics* enthralled me and continues to enthrall me with its clarity of thought, broad reach, and superbly precise expression. Emotionally, I have been captivated for years by Eric-Emmanuel Schmitt's *Oscar and the Lady in Pink* and Emmanuel Carrère's *The Adversary*, both very heavy, but nevertheless hopeful stories. Michel Houellebecq's *The Elementary Particles* and *The Map and the Territory* have not only had a deep impact on me, but on the greater part of Estonian society. I accomplished one of my biggest dreams when I had the opportunity to serve Emmanuel Bove's *My Friends* to Estonian readers: a book that I had been carrying around with me for about fifteen years.

The artist Jüri Mildeberg's paintings play an important role in both of your new books. What techniques of Mildeberg's art fascinate you, and why? Do you treat the pictures as a part of the whole, and feel that they can no longer be removed from the complete work, i.e. when translating?

I'm extremely happy that my writing inspired Mildeberg, and that a dialogue between text and image developed as a result. Jüri's visual world has always enchanted me, both in children's books and at art exhibitions. When my good friend Piret Raud started hinting that Jüri and I should collaborate, I believe she initially had a children's book in mind. However, I haven't come up with that kind of children's book yet. Instead, there arose those strange texts that I sensed might have something in common with Jüri's peculiar world. And, what do you know – they did.

As for translations, I don't believe that text and illustration are inseparable, necessarily. It can easily be the case that a text fits nicely in another cultural space in some way (or can at least be approachable for the reader), but the illustrations just won't do; tradition or, perhaps, trends decide a great deal. And similarly, it might happen that a foreign publisher is interested in a book for its visual qualities, but that interest dissolves after becoming acquainted with the text, for some reason. Although I'd like with all my heart and soul to believe that Jüri and I have made The Perfect Book, bitter experience tells me that our complete unit might not work as well everywhere. And that, as a matter of fact, is also interesting.

Another feature of your books is the theatricality nestled in them. *On the Energy of Estonian Essence* was recently made into a radio drama, and it has also been performed on stage: you've read it together with actors and musicians. Do you intentionally inject theatricality into your texts, or does it simply surface somehow? How important is a writer's performance in his or her work, the delivery of the writing, in your opinion?

When writing, I usually don't think about what exactly it is I'm writing at the moment. I allow the pen to run across the paper (yes, I do write with a good old-fashioned fountain pen), confident that whatever is produced will be clear later. Still, I do have a tendency to write in a way that the text reads aloud well. It's possible that the roots lie in my love of theater, which truly has always been a fascination. I relish direct speech in writing and translation, and have always tried to work "speakability" into my texts, to some extent (something that generally can't be conveyed in writing, but can at least be accentuated). When writing for children, I also always aim for the text to be alive; for it to at least have some parts that seem like a child's thought process and sound like a child's speech.

I elbowed my way onstage with my very first book: the actors Lee Merila and Kutt Kommel and I performed *An Old Song* several times, and it felt like it was a success. As of today, I've performed for audiences quite a lot, and have even learned to enjoy interacting with the audience. And, sometimes, I've gotten the impression that the sympathy is mutual. I don't believe that all writers should read their writing aloud: not every text is suited for it, and not all people are born performers. But if it turns out well, or even average, then you can find out a lot of interesting aspects of the text: kinks appear (if they exist, and they usually do), the author discovers details or entire passages that seemed fantastic while they were being written, but which scream for reworking upon being read aloud, and even the audience's reactions can direct attention to both the text's weaknesses and its strong suits. What's most important is the work that precedes reading it aloud: this forces you to thoroughly and attentively work through your writing, and gives you an opportunity to adjust, polish, and mold it into something better and stronger.

You've written quite a lot for children. One could say that you've written even more books for children than for adults. What is best or simpler to address through children's literature? Does children's literature allow you to use any frames of mind or standpoints that are not available when writing for adults?

Writing for children makes it easier to stay sane and survive, to hold onto optimism and hope. I think I already mentioned that I'm rather pessimistic by nature. Children help to boost my mood. One of the few things you can't especially use when writing for children is irony, and refraining from it reminds you that there are other ways of seeing the world. Writing children's books brings out the brighter side of me, and not, by the way, because I think that one should bake kids a happiness-soaked pie and serve it to them with a mellow, comical sauce. Not at all. Kids can see straight through that garbage; they're well aware of when they're being underestimated. They're often much more interesting and, actually, even more intelligent than adults. There have been periods in my life when I just can't stand adults (such as when I more or less synchronously wrote the children's books *Home* and *Ten Little Butterflies*). I've felt at times that I don't understand adults, and vice versa, but some kind of common language has always seemed possible with children. I've often wondered: "Where on Earth do those smart, open-minded, and exciting people whom I see at schools and kindergartens disappear to? Why does their number only diminish as the years go by? Does life really wear them down so severely?"

Which of your children's books has been the greatest success so far, and why? Or can that even be asked? Are all of them equally dear to you?

I can't answer that. Still, there is one rule: the newest is the dearest to you for a short while. It's the latest one of your works, to which you've dedicated yourself with your whole heart and soul. The farther a book recedes in time, the more mistakes you notice. But on the other hand, every book has mistakes, just

EVA AND INDREK KOFF MEETING READERS AT PÄRNU CENTRAL LIBRARY

PHOTO BY URMAS LUIK / SCANPIX

as there are things that you believe you've pulled off pretty well. So, overall, one might say that they're all dear.

We've translated a selection of texts from *Stories of a Hundred Nations* for this issue of *Estonian Literary Magazine*. What Estonian authors or works would you personally recommend for translation?

First and foremost, the ones that appeal to translators: they are the people, to whom we owe a debt of gratitude for their missionary work that results in most foreign-language translations of Estonian literature. If a translator is able to work on a book that touches him or her – one with which the translator can identify – then we can hope that the translation will turn out to be a good one, a text that can speak to readers.

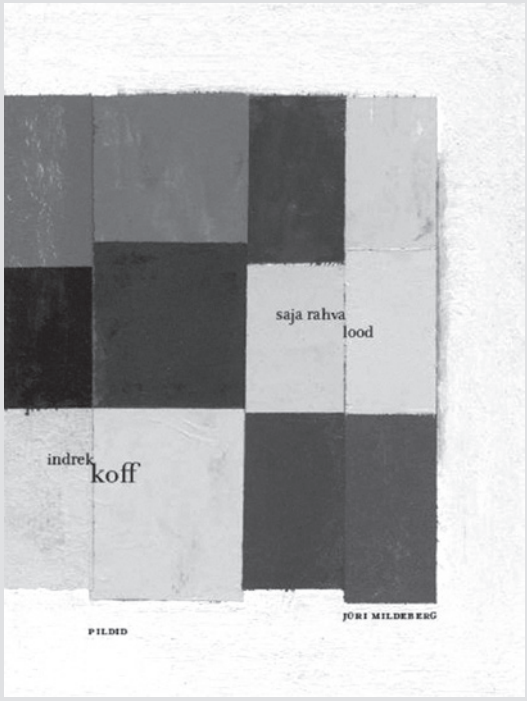
I'd also like to note that there probably aren't a lot of works about which one can make the general and abstract remark: "*This* is worth translating." What comes into play first of all is the question of translatability (i.e. how deeply the text is rooted in its cultural context and time, where and to what extent it draws upon the author's language, and whether there is any hope in achieving an even slightly similar effect in other languages), as well as the factor of the other culture (i.e. whether the topic speaks to its audience, whether the manner of treatment is fresh and thought-provoking in the culture, and whether it's at all acceptable in the eyes of the audience, or even of the literary market – because, alas, it *is* always about the market). Andrus Kivirähk's *The Man Who Spoke Snakish*[1] has turned out to be highly popular in France, but how will it do in other cultural spaces? I suppose it's a Pandora's box from which questions never end, questions to which clear answers are nowhere to be found.

Despite what I just said, I'll venture to name a few authors and works that I'm quite certain are worth spreading as widely as possible. One Estonian writer who, I believe, is here to stay, and is luckily already being translated, is Andrei Ivanov. His masterpiece, *Harbin Moths*, deserves to be translated most of all, though it's still biding its time. Another author who has likewise been translated, but certainly not enough, is Aino Pervik: children in countries around the world should have the opportunity to read her newest books, as well as her earlier ones, such as *Arabella, the Pirate's Daughter* and *Old Mother Kunks*. A few other personal favorites that might possibly resonate in a more universal plane include Ene Mihkelson's *Plague Grave*, Peeter Sauter's *Baby Blue*, and fs' *2004*. Oh, there are more and more and more living authors I could list, and there are additionally the timeless classics who are still read and cherished in Estonia. Why shouldn't they be loved by a foreign audience, too? The first names that come to mind are Eno Raud, Mati Unt, and Kalev Kesküla. I don't know whether Madis Kõiv is translatable, but one can always try. Oskar Luts, without a doubt. In short, there's no end in sight to the work available to translators and publishers.

1 Title translated by Christopher Moseley, and published in English by Grove Atlantic (2016).

Stories of a Hundred Nations

by Indrek Koff · Excerpts translated by Adam Cullen



STORIES OF A HUNDRED NATIONS BY INDREK KOFF AND JÜRI MILDEBERG

A fairy tale about warm light.

A fairy tale about the hundred faces of loneliness.

A reflective fairy tale about your life.

A fairy tale about the Tooth Fairy.

A fairy tale about people and money, with a happy ending.

A fairy tale about sad playgrounds.

A fairy tale about the need for achievement.

A fairy tale about a major artist and a minor artist.

A fairy tale about a city or a town or an island or—God forbid—even a kingdom, to which someone forms a very special and, at least at first sight, inexplicable bond. If the person is lucky enough to go there once, to spend a little time there, to simply wander around and breathe it in, then later, he or she can't so much as hear its name without feeling the knife twist

in the wound; especially since in spite of every good intention (I'll make a point of learning the local language; we'll keep in touch, dear friends; I'll come and visit often—yeah, for sure, very often, naturally; I simply couldn't have it any other way), life leads him or her away from that place, like from a first love. And that person is ashamed of being powerless to do anything; ashamed of letting life run him or her over time and again. Sometimes, that person even feels like a martyr—which is a much better feeling! But that sense of longing persists above all; an intense longing and a hazy notion that if he or she had been capable, if he or she had gotten the upper hand over fate, then everything would be completely different right now; everything would be much better. That person would be happy. Life would be beautiful.

A very long fairy tale about jealousy.

A vitally important fairy tale about where and why empathy was lost.

A fairy tale about collaboration, with unsuspected twists. Misunderstandings, misinterpretations, sorry, but no one told me, lags, listen don't be mad but I actually can't, loss of interest, bungles, our rhythms simply don't match, no, I understand, of course, spontaneity is often the key to success, but, well, we should still put some kind of a plan in place, right? As strange as it may seem, the collaborators very often achieve some result, against all odds; something is produced, beauty or order or another thing that lies more towards the plus-side of life is added to the world, notwithstanding. The world is full of miracles?

A fairy tale, the teller of which is prepared for anything, absolutely anything—if only the kid would quit making a racket.

An unusual fairy tale about an absolutely ordinary family. They lived and loved, worked hard to earn their daily bread for the table, fought like cats and dogs on Saturdays, never especially wronged anyone, and died in the end. A beautiful life, in reality; but one that is quite rarely told in fairy tales, for some reason.

A fairy tale about how information technology is always good. Information technology is the utmost expression of progress, the investment for a bright future, the apotheosis of the capability of the human mind, and whoever doesn't understand that should go throw themselves off a cliff.

A fairy tale about how once, people came together and started looking for the best way to structure society. They searched and they searched, but couldn't find one. Each one went back to living on his or her own again.

A bitter fairy tale about insults. The positive protagonists get over feeling insulted easily, just like they always get over everything. The negative ones don't, of course—the insult poisons them, eats away at them, incites them to plot revenge, and takes away their lives and their best years. At the same time, no matter—better half an egg than an empty shell, et cetera. And what's really the difference—everyone is going to die in the end, anyway. When even the Sun finally goes out.

A fairy tale about a blameless and pure nation's just rage.

A fairy tale about technological devices that are meant to make things easier, but which strangely make things more and more complicated instead, until the unfortunate user finally ends up utterly confused. This often leads to despair, and in isolated, especially extreme cases, even to depression and suicide.

An appalling fairy tale. One for each.

A fairy tale about how all is not yet lost. And about how even if mankind and the world that surrounds him is lost; if everything that a human knows and perceives in its limitlessness is lost—that then, only a trivial part of everything is actually lost. And if you follow that logic, then everything that is lost should, of course, end up in the place, to which it is lost. So, if it really feels like everything is lost in one place, then in that other place, where everything disappeared to, that same "everything" does very much exist, and, in truth, is even in excess, because it hadn't even existed in that place before. If I should have to say now which place I'd personally like to be in at this moment, then to tell the truth, I'd be at a loss.

A fairy tale about all the things that shouldn't be.

A cloud-counting fairy tale.

A fairy tale about good, evil, and nuances.

A fairy tale about white clouds in a summery sky. It's not really of much use, but it makes living easier somehow. Brighter, even, I'd say.

A fairy tale about the hope that all this crap will end one day.

A fairy tale about a world that changes at such a rapid pace that even the best adaptors to it inevitably lose the ground beneath their feet.

A fairy tale that stretches into infinity about a fairy tale that stretches into infinity.

A real fairy tale.

A fairy tale of all fairy tales.

An out-of-hand fairy tale.

A fairy tale about passion.

A fairy tale about strength.

A fairy tale about serving.

A fairy tale about disavowal.

A fairy tale about lucidity.

A fairy tale.

ILLUSTRATION BY JÜRI MILDEBERG

Six Estonian short story writers throughout time. A personal insight

by Mait Vaik

When I was asked to write about the five Estonian short story writers I enjoy the most, I unconsciously wondered: based on what criteria? This article will be translated into English, and will introduce Estonian short stories and their authors abroad. But is there any point in writing about those whose works, for the most part, don't differ from what already exists in the world, such as the Estonian classics who certainly don't pale alongside global literature, but who, in fact, offer nothing novel? Thus, I attempted to spend time only on the authors whose writing, form, or style are somehow (very conditionally) special and unique to us as Estonians. Luckily, there are many of them.

If one is to speak about the Estonian short story, the history of which extends into the early 20th century, then it's impossible to overlook its inarguable luminary and father, **Friedebert Tuglas** (1886–1971). Tuglas' best-known short story *Popi and Huhuu* stands apart from both Nordic and Soviet short fiction. Published in 1914, it tells of two animals abandoned in a home. After their owner fails to return, the aggressive chimp and small dog start living their own lives in the shuttered apartment. The monkey escapes his cage and starts to play the role

FRIEDEBERT TUGLAS · ARCHIVE PHOTO

of master. Everything changes, degenerates, and crumbles. Although the chimp is spiteful and sadistic towards the little dog, he becomes a replacement for their owner all the same, and can even be loved. This is perhaps the most dismal and grim twist to the story. The work's political subtext was immediately recognized, and can be applied to any leaderless or godless society. Philosophically, *Popi and Huhuu* is definitely world-class literature.

JAAN OKS · ARCHIVE PHOTO

Regardless, many contemporary critics believe that **Jaan Oks** (1884–1918) was Estonia's best novelist to date. Oks sent his works to Tuglas (though they allegedly never met in person), who edited and then published them. However, reviewers at the time wrote that it would be better if Oks were to rot alive… And so things went, in part: Oks died of tuberculosis of the bones. His writing is hulking and possesses an immense, intense energy. It seems to scorn everything and everyone, whether the subject is nature, women, reproduction, lust, life, or God himself. Oks was extremely self-serving, exceptionally sensitive to life events, and petulant; he was incapable of understanding how life could be so cruel. All the same, Oks' genius lies not in his views, but rather in his style and the superior outbursts of his writing, creating a trance that certainly exceeds the bounds of ordinary prose. His works are part poetry, and contain something unique to him alone, something striking, writhing, and screeching. It's occasionally difficult for the reader to follow what is actually taking place in the storyline, and who is who. Everything melts together: the plowman turns into the horse, then the horse into the plowman, after which the forest and the sky speak, and by the end of the novella, the reader feels as if he or she has stepped off a merry-go-round and, in addition to dizziness, the rider has received a proper beating as it spun. Oks also wrote more sedate and comprehensible stories, but his depiction of human life is always futile, oppressive, and distressing. The ideal in Oks' worldview was the triumph of pure sensibility, something that is, alas, hindered by endless sexuality, a woman, pain, and death. Comparing Oks to a foreign writer, Knut Hamsun and his work *Hunger* come to mind.

Viewed as a whole throughout its history, Estonian short fiction has certainly been heavy, growing slightly lighter and more cheerful only over the last few years. The Soviet occupation left its mark, as did the building of both Estonian republics, along with the woes and difficulties that accompanied the process. Much has been borrowed from Scandinavia, the humor is bitter or hidden and somewhat British, and merry storytelling is rarely encountered. The Estonian short story is a bonanza for the depressive reader. During the Soviet occupation, when publishing was rather

TOOMAS VINT · PHOTO BY SVEN ARBET / SCANPIX

problematic, novels were often turned into short stories; nowadays, the opposite is sometimes the case. To speak briefly of Soviet-era Estonian short stories, its distinctive archetype is certainly **Toomas Vint** (1944). Vint was perhaps the only Estonian short prose author who, in his own unusual way, did not try to be superior to the Soviet system as most strove to do, but to aesthetically deny it altogether. Aesthetics was precisely what disarmed the censor. His works resemble a formerly enchanting, but now forgotten park in an Orwellian totalitarian state that lacks any trace of beauty. As the antipode to those years (and even in today's context), Vint's man-and-women dramas are very individualistic. There is no room for a foolish society or secondary factors: no room for isms or ideologies. It is above all Vint's ability to maintain and convey a lost harmony that makes him the king of occupation-era Estonian short fiction.

For the true connoisseur, I would recommend **Jüri Tuulik** (1940–2014) from the tiny island of Abruka, and particularly the works published over the last few years of his life. His writing is somewhat choleric, comprehensible but sometimes inexplicable, and exceptionally personal. A kind of hopeless farewell echoes from Tuulik's writing. The reader feels like a bird soaring above a stormy sea, and the text doesn't apply direct pressure to the soul, as is common in stories of inescapability.

Like many Estonian short story authors, Tuulik writes in his own space: the setting of his stories is a tiny island recognizable to Estonians, but at the same time, this does not disturb those unfamiliar with such places. On the contrary! In spite of the details, the author created his landscapes in a universally intelligible manner. And although nature, the sea, and the sky play an important part in his writing, the plots could also be set in a coastal Scandinavian village, or anywhere that is windy and populated by seagulls… Tuulik's distancing and farewell makes specific sites, nature, and life

JÜRI TUULIK · PHOTO BY ARVI KRIIS / SCANPIX

itself abstract. The world is like a decoration, of which one cannot and will not let go. Although his early writing is humorous and folksy, and his later works do not go beyond that, they do not offer frank truths in a verbal context. Rather, the stories can be compared to paintings. Tuulik's best-known work is the short novel *Crow* (*Vares*), which was published in the late 1970s, has been reprinted thrice, and has been translated into several foreign languages, including English. A few of his better short stories and novellas have been compiled in the collection *A Lone Bird Above the Sea* (*Üksik lind mere kohal*, 2002).

AGU TAMMEVESKI · PHOTO BY PEETER LANGOVITS / SCANPIX

Another one of Estonia's more intriguing contemporary prosaists is the little-known **Agu Tammeveski** (1951). Immediately after entering the literary scene in the late 1980s, his novella *Air* (*Õhk*) received the prestigious Estonian cultural journal Vikerkaar's annual prize. Tammeveski's characters are primarily men whose struggles and senses of aspiration have reached a breaking point, where nothing has meaning any longer, a point which is often also darkened by a failed relationship. What makes Tammeveski's writing exceptional is that his existentialism is always distant; it lacks sadness. It's just the way things are… Literature, or creativity in general, rests (at least to a certain extent) upon something that might be called the universal. It is the point from which every writer or artist (or human in general) departs, consciously or unconsciously, even if that individual proceeds with the intention to destroy, demolish, or renew the concept of humanity. Yet, Tammeveski's appeal lies in his unnerving originality, where the writer's worldview and foundation are anchored in something entirely different: not ruling out the expression of humanity, but seemingly passing it by. Thus, immorality is not inherently abnormal, but due to something far deeper. Tammeveski's texts can't be compared to those by authors who probe limits, because for him those limits apparently don't exist. There is simply… air. Stylistically, he writes with incredible clarity, and the text is gossamer, almost breathable. But at the same time, it isn't dry, which is generally expected of the prosaic style. I believe that in the 1980s, together with Tõnu Õnnepalu and Juhan Habicht, Tammeveski smashed the former (and especially occupation-era) framework of the Estonian novella. A satisfactory overview of his writing can be found in the 2003 Estonian-language collection *A Long Sprint. Stories from 1986–2001* (*Pikk hoojooks. Jutte aastaist 1986–2001*).

As for contemporary authors, I would firstly highlight a writer named **Mudlum**. Although her debut on the literary scene came just recently, several of her short stories return to the Soviet era and, like many authors, she is often very personal in her storytelling. Memories of her childhood

MUDLUM · PHOTO BY LIIS TREIMANN / SCANPIX

and youth are told relatively directly and without the use of any tricks. Space and details are of great importance in Mudlum's stories, creating an atmosphere where nothing special seems to happen, but where the scene itself is a part of the message. Her lexicon is extremely rich and sometimes even overwhelming, recalling classics such as Gustave Flaubert and his Salammbô. The language Mudlum uses is beautiful. At the same time, the writer is more than a describer of situations: in many of her short stories, she has the densest concepts and is the most philosophical of contemporary Estonian short prose writers. Mudlum's inner dialogue is outstanding and, at times, she is even capable of being more masculine than Estonia's male writers. In truth, her writing touches all ends of the spectrum: her diapason is extremely wide. In addition to melancholy, Mudlum displays sharp but all-the-more hidden humor: life's twists, turns, and distancing are all doubted in a particular way. She loves the individual above all, and we encounter little if any relationship drama. Relationships are a part of being human, but in no way a free-standing fire. Generally, her narrator or protagonist provides something bright and positive – or at least something ironic – to go with the typical despondent mood. Mudlum doesn't give up... To date, she has published two collections of short stories: *A Serious Person* (*Tõsine inimene*, 2014) and *A Bird's Eyes* (*Linnu silmad*, 2016).

I've covered merely a tiny fraction of Estonian short-story writing here, and I certainly don't possess a full overview of everything. Estonians write voluminously (or even awfully voluminously), and as such, I've inevitably overlooked a number of authors; there simply wasn't enough space.

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NEW *ELM* AUTHORS: **Mait Vaik** (1969) is an Estonian writer and musician. Vaik has played in several legendary Estonian rock bands, such as Vennaskond, Metro Luminal, and Sõpruse Puiestee. He is still active in the

MAIT VAIK · PHOTO BY RAUNO VOLMAR / SCANPIX

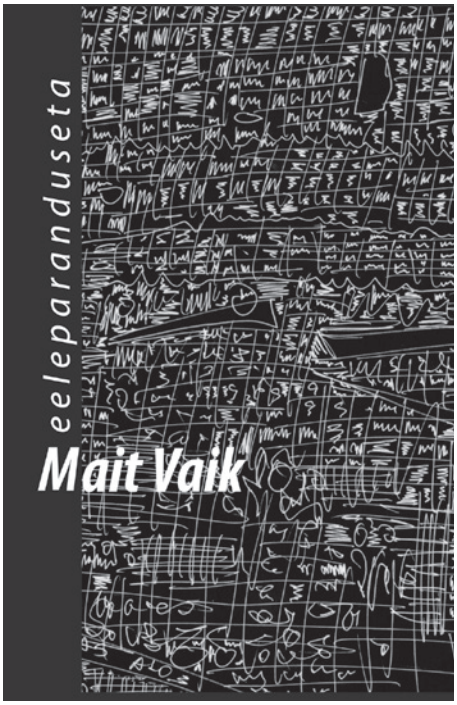
latter. Vaik has written lyrics (and sometimes also music) for several of the aforementioned bands. His first book, *Everyone is Always Right* (*Kõigil on alati õigus*, 2012), was indeed a collection of lyrics and poems. A year later, he published his first collection of short stories, *Juss and Brothers* (*Juss ja vennad*, 2013), which has sometimes also been classified as a short novel. Currently, Vaik is regarded as one of Estonia's most intriguing short story writers, and has published two collections: *Clock-Out* (*Tööpäeva lõpp*, 2014) and *Without Repentance* (*Meeleparanduseta*, 2016). His story *Purity* (*Puhtus*) received the Friedebert Tuglas Short Story Award, which is one of Estonia's most prestigious literary recognitions.

Reviews of Mait Vaik's books:

Clock-Out: "Vaik possesses the ability to create impressions and moods. And when he feels that one style or perspective is starting to wear itself thin, he is capable of switching it quickly. This especially stands out in the collection's only narration, *Man*, which tells the story of a man and his loved ones through various registers and approaches. The author's interest in a range of storyteller personae can be seen in this particular piece, as well as in a few others: on a number of occasions, he turns to the Estonian language's informal "you" form, which is relatively unusual in Estonian literature. This is a good way to get nastily under the reader's skin." **Peeter Helme**

Without Repentance: "Over and over when reading the prose texts in Mait Vaik's collection *Without Repentance*, you're astounded by how powerful good literature can be: such literary greats as Mann, Dostoyevsky, Bunin, Kafka and, of course, Vaik himself (as a writer of rather unparalleled lyrics) unconsciously run through your mind. However, with the publication of his book *Juss and Brothers*, the prose-Vaik swiftly rose to the level of the lyrics-Vaik and the latter's very recognizable style." **Paavo Matsin**

CLOCK-OUT BY MAIT VAIK



WITHOUT REPENTANCE BY MAIT VAIK

Five Snow Whites and Not a Single Prince

by Carolina Pihelgas
Written in English by the author, edited by Adam Cullen

Writing about female poets, one inevitably arrives at a disturbing thought: why are some women regarded as poets, and others as poetesses? The idea that some poets write "female poetry" echoes Simone de Beauvoir's idea that man is defined as a human being and a woman as a female. But is that so? Aare Pilv has pointed out[1] that the term *female poetry* carries several contradictory, yet intertwined meanings in Estonian literature. Firstly, there is the widely-admired notion of the "Great Female Poets" of the 19th and 20th century, the central figures of which were Lydia Koidula, Marie Under, and Betti Alver. As early as in 1939, Ants Oras wrote that "women have acquired an astonishing eminence in [Estonian] poetry,"[2] and describes how they had shaped the Estonian literary canon, although this applies almost exclusively to poetry. Oras finds that the remarkable influence of female poets was partly possible because there were no set rules and no examples to follow. Lydia Koidula, one of the first influential poets who played a large role in Estonia's national awakening during the 1860s, had to "forge her literary weapons herself."[3] Women could easily gain public notice and play a significant role, because Estonian literature had yet to be invented.

On the other hand, *female poetry* is often used to belittle and condescend, implying that it is a poetry of lesser quality. Aare Pilv has shown how this alternative use of the term came into existence in the early 1980s in reference to a series of literary debuts by women. Initially a rather neutral and descriptive notion, it became increasingly condescending, and one could say that now, over the last forty years, we have witnessed a patronizing and marginalizing use of the term – one that sounds as absurd as, for example, *male politics*. Of course, one

1 *Aare Pilv, "Naisluule – üks mõiste eesti luulekriitikas"*. Vikerkaar *10/20011, pp 67–77.*

2 *Ants Oras, "Naiskirjanikest meil ja mujal" http://www.kirjandusarhiiv.net/?p=540*

3 *ibid.*

SVETA GRIGORJEVA · PHOTO BY JÜRGEN ROOSTE

KELLY TURK · PHOTO BY SUMMER WONG

cannot say that the concept has flourished in Estonian literary criticism. Even so, it seems to reappear periodically. The most recent debate over *female poetry* sparked in 2013 after a TV show – again, it was a wave of debuts by young female poets that started the discussion. Jürgen Rooste, who was one of the show hosts, described young poetry as "bad girls and good guys" while referring to authors like Sveta Grigorjeva or Helena Läks, who are frank, sharp, and undoubtedly less lyrical than the Great Female Poets; thus appearing rather subversive.

Sveta Grigorjeva's debut collection *Who's Afraid of Sveta Grigorjeva?* (*Kes kardab Sveta Grigorjevat?* 2013) was a central issue in the discussion about *female poetry*. The book contains many layers: Grigorjeva's texts seem, especially at first glance, rebellious and even angry: "I really am crazy // totally unhinged since birth / filled with inexplicable rage / rage against every damn thing I see and touch". The poetic self in her poems is a girl in her mid-twenties, who doesn't want to fit into the roles society offers her as a young woman. Being half-Estonian, half-Russian, the problems of "fitting in" only intensify. A good example of this is a poem where a teacher asks children who they would like to be in the fairy tale of Snow White. To the teacher's disappointment, the narrator chooses the role of the witch, since there are already "17 snow whites / 11 hunters / 6 princes". Even though most of Grigorjeva's poems are written in the first person, she masterfully plays with intertextuality, irony, and litotes, creating in fact a polyphony of voices.

Similarly polyphonic is the poetry of **Kelly Turk**, who implements a plethora of masks and role play in her debut collection *Real Life* (*Reaalne elu*, 2014). Her poems' characters are our peers: girls at a party tagging each other on Facebook; a construction worker making a living in Finland, reflecting

SILVIA URGAS · PHOTO BY LIIS TREIMANN / SCANPIX

HELENA LÄKS · PHOTO BY KAAREL RAADIK

over his life; and women who ache for slimmer bodies, or who cannot find happiness without expensive brands. Turk gives these ordinary people with ordinary thoughts and dreams a voice: "waiting for payday again / to go to the store / to spend most of the money in half an hour / to feel like a real human being / because / life is too short / to not / imitate the rich and the beautiful". She describes people almost exclusively by their surroundings, but paradoxically, this materialistic view also expresses their inner life: her characters yearn for better boyfriends and better looks; for a better life – a real life. She uses a generous amount of slang and internet vocabulary in her texts, which makes her poems an almost anthropological study.

Silvia Urgas has been called a poet of the 90s generation. Her prize-winning collection *Destination* (*Siht / koht*, 2015) includes nostalgic lyrics from 90s Estonian pop music, a medical description of the heart, and the poesy of everyday life. Her writing abounds in colloquial metaphors and wordplays: "today all day I've felt like a teletext / that heard the word "internet" for the first time / and staring back from the mirror is a floppy disk / not even wanted by hipsters for a high price". Her generation's mentality seems to manifest in the hollow gap that lies between real life and the virtual: "please love me / until the internet comes back / before we find the remote / in-between the cushions". Still, there is an easiness to Urgas' poems, even when she writes about Estonia's dependency on Russian gas (and how she'd flee to the forest if there was a war) or homophobic sentiments.

Helena Läks' first collection *Helena Went* (*Helena läks*, 2010 – a play on her name) features long, suggestive lines – streams of consciousness that take hold of the reader with their wild imagination: "unshaven cheeks against plaster plight /

EDA AHI · PHOTO BY ALDO LUUD / SCANPIX

we are so velvetly inept / like if Socrates had played handball at a golf club / with the dark hollows beneath his eyes". Läks' debut was powerful, yet effortless; imaginative and sophisticated like Jamaican rhythms that meet passages from the Old Testament. In her second collection *Corrosion Ache* (*Korrosioonikihk*, 2014), the language is more tamed and even melancholic. She writes about broken relationships, the death of loved ones, and reflects on the passing of time. It is interesting to note that Läks is a poet who doesn't refer explicitly to the female experience; however, her latest book includes a poem dedicated to the debate around the concept of female poetry. Titled "On female poetry, with one masculine breath" ("Naisluulest ühe mehise hingetõmbega"), it reads: "I'd rather fuck you / than read your poems / so your / femininely narrow / erudition / your poor / expressive ability / is the problem".

The poetry of **Eda Ahi** seems to be molded by the tradition of the "Great Female Poets" more than any other contemporary Estonian works. Her first collection *Masquerade* (*Maskiball*, 2012) won the Betti Alver Prize for Debut Literature, and she was subsequently seen as a successor to Alver's style. Indeed, the dominant voice in Ahi's poems resembles that of Alver's early works: it is self-conscious and bright-minded, sometimes remarkably straightforward, and occasionally ironic. Ahi also uses rhyme and a wide range of meters, which is rather exceptional in younger Estonian poetry. She further established her distinct style with her next two collections *Gravity* (*Gravitatsioon*, 2013) and *Security* (*Julgeolek*, 2014), combining rhyme, enjambment, and antithesis – this subtle technique creates multi-layered wordplays that are often untranslatable. Several of Ahi's poems are dedicated to classical authors (i.e. Virgil and Tolstoy), literary characters such as Anna Karenina,

and even mythical figures like the biblical Adam: "although your shadow will long remain / the timber of my ship's mast / I'll never, Adam, become / bony enough to be / anyone's rib bone".

These five poets, all under the age of 30, give us a certain cross section of what is happening in younger Estonian poetry right now. On the one hand, we find dynamic and colorful spoken language, idioms, and slang; on the other, we can encounter quite traditional style, including classical rhyming techniques. There is an explicit use of personae (e.g. in Kelly Turks's poems), but also more personal topics, such as in Helena Läk's poetry. Some of the poets seem to make us close witnesses to their private struggles, as Sveta Grigorjeva; others keep a cool distance from the reader, like Eda Ahi. As one might expect, many references to multimedia and digital artefacts appear: "my brain's of very little use / if it's not connected to wikipedia", as Silvia Urgas candidly writes. However, behind the curtains of everyday routine always lie love, death, happiness, and suffering.

Do these poets have anything to do with *female poetry*? Yes and no. If the author's gender is enough to make up a category, then the irritating label might work – it *is* a convenient topic for literary events or TV arguments. Nevertheless, it sweeps attention away from the poetry itself, redirecting it towards the author. Sometimes this can be useful, but mostly it just shows poor taste. Of course, women can be portrayed as Snow Whites writing verses in their spare time, but this won't bring us closer to the subject of poetry itself. Notwithstanding the particular intentions of a piece of literary criticism, *female poetry* always carries the connotation of being something *lesser*. Yet, there is some hope for change. Perhaps there may even be a few militant feminists around, as Silvia Urgas warns in her poem "tips for the literary reviewer":

some words of advice for the novice
or experienced tired worn-out
reviewer

[...]

I can understand
if you use the words
female poet
a couple times; I forgive you

but it'd be dumb
to compare me to other women
just because of my gender, too
the internet now has people
who understand that
and will tear you to shreds in public

CAROLINA PIHELGAS (1986) is a poet and translator. She has published four poetry collections and translated poems into Estonian from Spanish, English, Greek and Norwegian. Pihelgas became the editor of the literary magazine Värske Rõhk in 2011.

Sveta Grigorjeva
who's afraid of sveta grigorjeva?

one time in grade school
the topic of reading class was
fairy tales redone by Disney

(that's not quite how we classified it back then
back then we didn't really classify anything
we were little)

when it was snow white's turn
the teacher asked
all the students to pick

who they'd like to
be
in that fairy tale

when it came around to me
I answered clearly that
I'd like to be
the witch

at which point
the teacher's forehead wrinkled and
she asked rather roughly
why

does that mean I want to be nasty and evil

of course not, I replied, but
right now our class already has

17 snow whites
11 hunters
6 princes and not a single witch

so do we want a fairy tale
or a reality
dating show

meaning

please don't dub me
the next
angry young woman

I'm not angry

if you draw any parallels
then please,
I'd rather it be

to jesus

Helena Läks

palm reader (a.k.a.) don't mention it

an old man wearing
a cotton-padded coat
rubber boots
just stopped before me and said he sees my opening
I was upset
doubtless means something disgusting old pervert
my expression made him rush to clarify
no young lady nothing suggestive
I just looked into your eyes and they tell me
you're going to die before I do

I was upset all the same
well a long life to you then old man I snapped back
the geezer beamed
I suppose that's what he'd been longing to hear

Kelly Turk
where do little fat girls go?

where do little
fat girls go
when insulted
beneath clotheslines
behind a house
to practice
to practice a speech
for
getting back at
nasty thin girls
whose mothers take time daily
to braid their hair
so tightly
that their eyes are out of orbit
and whose grandmothers care enough
to sew them dresses
with those nasty pink downy feathers
and with velvety fabric
that would accentuate belly rolls
on fat girls

where do little
fat girls go
when angered
to the bathroom
to practice in front of a mirror
the punches
they'd throw to knock nasty
boys out cold
right in front of the other boys
c'mere you asshole and call me
blubber-face again

where do little
fat girls go
when they grow up
into athletics
to a gym
to a clinic for eating disorders
to a triathlon in south africa
to marry a rich man
to liposuction
to marry a poor man
so there's nothing to eat
to work at a candy store
for self-torture
or they become
a poet

where do little
fat girls go
when they die

I won't tell!

Silvia Urgas

it's just about late enough that the clock hands show
you're-a-dope-for-caring-
but-time-for-us-to-have-one-more-drink-now
and some guy in the smoking room
whose iq has got to be higher than a potato
asks my opinion about the beginning stages
of the development of the boyar class
and if it isn't
too much trouble for me to
maybe formulate my response
in esperanto
but well as for my creative works
maybe I could try to write
about the heart

sure thing
the heart is a hollow cone-shaped
muscular organ
but what else is there to write about it?

it's enveloped by a serous membrane
called a pericardium
and my brain's of very little use
if it's not connected to wikipedia

carrying id in a strange city
I can now prove I've walked around
this planet
with my heart's visceral lamina
for eighteen years
and won my right
to suppress my liver and lungs

what's all that got to do with the heart?
I've no clue but I guess that
organisms are like communities –
if fried potatoes burn in one apartment
the whole stairwell will stink later

but let's go and turn the clock one more time
so october definitely won't end just yet
we'll take an hour from spring to balance it after
and give scientific confirmation to the feeling
that fall always lasts longer than spring

so yeah that was about the heart
next'll be about lumbar plexuses or about
how I find out from the bathroom shelf
that your hands smell like marigold
and in every strange kitchen
there's a trash can under the sink
without a doubt there's a trash can
under the sink

Eda Ahi

dance lessons with gravity

they dance with you, gravity, everyone.
but only the brave know the steps they should take.
you've got that cruel but equalizing trait:
both rock and feather are attracted to you.

wearing your crown that depresses towards ground,
I obediently walk where you guide me to.
I love you heavily, dear gravity,
and wouldn't exchange you, not even for wings.

Translated by Adam Cullen

Nikolai Baturin: a celebrated stranger

by Berk Vaher

How can one explain Nikolai Baturin's works and creative identity to someone from a different and distant culture, when they are quite the mystery right here in Estonia? How can one cultivate interest in someone who hasn't heard of or read the author by conjuring up a perceptible image, when in this culture that perceptible image is primarily an excuse for convenient ignorance and for eschewing reading?

A consensus has taken hold in Estonian literature: Baturin is a classic, a great, an exceptional author. In early 2016, on the eve of his 80th birthday, he received the Cultural Endowment of Estonia's Award for Lifetime Achievement in Literature. It was, perhaps, due to both the former and the latter circumstances that his newest novel *The Mongols' Dreamlike Invasion of Europe* (*Mongolite unenäoline invasioon Euroopasse*, 2016) received greater media attention than several of his earlier and no less remarkable works published during the 21st century. And yet, how much discussion of his books takes place among cultural enthusiasts and the literati? How much talk of his entire literary treasury is there, of its merits and heroic protagonists? (Is it even possible to converse on the topic of literature today without treating heroism unironically? Baturin's works present the possibility, but this tends to remain merely possible…)

Baturin doesn't clamor to be noticed, doesn't exhibit himself; he doesn't blog, doesn't "like", doesn't "share", doesn't collect important friends, doesn't badmouth, doesn't offend, doesn't tweet about popular gossip, doesn't fire off freedom-of-speech slogans, and doesn't play the martyr of transgressiveness. In today's culture, this means that even though he pens worthy literature, he doesn't compete at any cost with his colleagues for attention, coverage, or a following. Baturin chose, ages ago, to restrain his ego in order to live in his creation, to refrain from making autobiographical revelations about himself as an individual so as to focus on the allegorical illumination of himself as a human being

NIKOLAI BATURIN IN 2008 · PHOTO BY SVEN ARBET / SCANPIX

in his works of literature, to avoid popular and flashy modern-day topics in order to capture what transcends the ages in the temporal, and to use the temporal solely as a necessary switch or a launching pad, if at all. The "Avarilm"[1] of Baturin's works, as he calls it, is above all mythical, magical, and archetypal, even in the precision of its socio-ecological details; his prose is poetic and has become increasingly elliptical. This isn't easy for a literary reviewer to handle, given today's tilt towards "critical realism".

Or is this even a modern problem? It's easy to blame the impatience and superficiality of the digital age for this alienation, but as the writer and translator Aivo Lõhmus (1950–2005) wrote twenty years ago: "Over the years, time and again, a book that somehow seemed unapproachable against the backdrop of contemporary Estonian literature emerged from the deep nothingness of the Siberian wilds; from the sweeping boreal forests; from the endless unpopulated expanses. And they remain unapproachable today – so unusual and extraordinary are all of Baturin's works in the context of Estonian literature."[2] Sixteen years before that, Lõhmus also wrote: "Nikolai Baturin, who has now come to publish his tenth book (*Somersault Stories* (*Tirelilood*), Tallinn: Eesti Raamat, 1980), is, to me, a slightly mystical individual to this day. It is difficult for me to vividly imagine a man who spends two-thirds of the year somewhere far away in the virgin Siberian forests, killing wild animals and skinning them for the benefit of Soviet industry, and who spends one-third of the year writing literature in Estonia, for the Estonian people; and who furthermore writes poetry in the Mulgi dialect. A man who uses the Estonian language so extravagantly in his prose that it makes even much-seen and much-read reviewers shake their heads, at a loss."[3] Aivo Lõhmus, one of the most sensitive (and responsible) evaluators of Baturin's writing, made remarkable mental and spiritual efforts to overcome the alienation, and at the same time was not blinded by Baturin's exceptionality. Rather, through his precise critical remarks, he helped the writer himself to see the paths for delving into topics more clearly. Yet wasn't it confounding? Someone who thinks in their local dialect when the West is semi-secretly being ravenously consumed all around him, who flees to the taiga when the KuKu Club[4] and kitchen parties emerge as hubs for the artistic elite, who readily embarks for Siberia when so many were relieved to be set free from there?

Baturin, whose 1968 debut *Underground Lakes* (*Maa-alused järved*) was published in a boxed set of short poetry collections, did also frequent artists' studios. He may have ended up playing the role of *le sauvage noble*[5], something he enjoyed excessively at first (a fair amount of preening can be found in his early writing, both in

1 *A play on words from the Estonian compound word for "world"* – maailm *(land+ world/weather). Here, Baturin splices into it the Estonian word for "broad/spacious"* (avar)*, and in doing so opens up a realm of not only geographical, sub-oceanic, and cosmic expanses, but also of magical possibilities in the unknown and the ineffable.*

2 *Included in the collection* Power and Shadow *(*Võim ja vari*), Ilmamaa 2002, p 237.*

3 *Ibid., p 221.*

4 *KuKu Club is a legendary artists' haunt in central Tallinn.*

5 *"the savage noble" (French)*

NIKOLAI BATURIN IN 2008 · PHOTO BY SVEN ARBET / SCANPIX

terms of its roughness and cultivated qualities); however, it is worth noting that by remaining in the literary world, his mysteriousness to the understanding critic also grows. By facing literature, Baturin learned to be himself to an even greater extent: cultivating "literature" less, inhabiting the written word more deeply, and exploring his Avarilm within language itself. Baturin did not shift from poetry to prose, but rather into prose with poetry: he became increasingly bardic in his essays, short stories, and novels. Dramatic experiments were not fleeting tangents, but rather new, fruitful conquests of his poetry-prose. Colonies started supplying resources to the fatherland: in Baturin's later novels, narration often bursts into poetry or song, into a dramatic dialogue, into something entirely beyond genre. The author doesn't have the patience to stick to the tiny, restrained Nordic style of storytelling; he has a perpetual need to magnify language into capital first letters or into full caps, to wander in a dreamlike haze of cursive, or pop off ellipses on a hunt for who-knows-what-kind of imagined life-form. And time and again, amid the fireworks of stylistic excesses, there breaks out a silence; a pause. This shock wave of rapid withdrawal stuns the reader into thinking for him- or herself. Not all recover from the blow, and many discontinue reading…

Nevertheless, one of Baturin's works that is known and read more widely, and is translated, studied, and quoted from time to time to this day is his 1989 novel *The Heart of the Bear* (*Karu süda*). The complicated story of a man's search for himself deep in a boreal forest arose from Baturin's own years as a trapper. It is an astonishing achievement of harmony between the perception of nature and linguistic mastery,

between boreal crispness and exotic passion, between magical realism and realistic human ardor. After being published, the book became a gateway to remote places for many young anthropologists, and was also a gateway to intimacy for the author himself. Its protagonist Nika was Baturin's most thoroughly cognizant avatar to date, and variations of the character took the stage in several of Baturin's later novels: as Nikas in his childhood mystery *Timid Nikas, the Comber of Lions' Manes* (*Kartlik Nikas, lõvilakkade kammija*, 1993), as the nerd-turned-superhero/oil magnate Nikyas Bigart in *Centaur* (*Kentaur*, 2003), which won the 2002 Estonian Novel Competition, as the ill-fated captain and commander Nikolas Batrian in *A Fern in the Stone* (*Sõnajalg kivis*, 2006), and again as a seafaring passenger in the form of Nikodemes of Parnassos in *The Flying Dutchwoman* (*Lendav Hollandlanna*, 2012)... And although the events, characters, settings, and accentuations in these novels are very much unalike, the core is similar: impatience with common happiness and true happiness in suffering, the courage to face life and the lack of fear of death, a sense of the unknown and the opportunity for impossibility.

NIKOLAI BATURIN IN 2012 · PHOTO BY KARIN KALJULÄTE / SCANPIX

This bravado of big words and ponderous topics easily threatens to make the writing seem hollow and kitschy, but Baturin hurtles into the style's lofty reaches from a foundation of vast personal experience: he has lived his own Avarilm on the taiga, in primeval forests, and on the ocean. One can believe that he has lived it in love, as well. Not to mention sound, which is another tremendous dimension of his writing: Baturin has acknowledged that he once dreamed of becoming a composer. The intense sensory nature of Baturin's writing, and especially its musicality are proof that he has accomplished this dream in his own manner.

At the same time, readers tangled up in everyday troubles may have difficulty identifying with Baturin's epic *Übermenschen*. And yet, the most fantastic world conquerors of his books are balanced by parallel characters: the mild, frail, gentle-minded youth who embodies the protagonist's conscience. Has recent Estonian literature seen a more delicately sensitive short story than Baturin's *The Window to a Yard With a Spring* (*Aken allikaga aeda*), which appeared in the May 2015 edition of the literary magazine *Looming*? In it, Master Immortell, a "plant-man with bird knees" who is living out his twilight days in a nursing home, is confronted by memories from childhood and calls out for his dear sister, seeking genuine and direct human proximity, which is perhaps life's greatest mystery and opportunity for the impossible.

Baturin would not know himself if he did not know and appreciate the Other. A literary expert who possesses a late-20th-century academic education might accuse Baturin of colonialism or sexism after a cursory reading of his works, but a deeper reading reveals the author's respect for indigenous cultures and old customs, for the honoring of various religious backgrounds, and most of all for his strong and self-aware female figures. All of these motifs stand straightforwardly and recognizably in the foreground of Baturin's latest novel, *The Mongols' Dreamlike Invasion of Europe*. Although the book's plot is tied to the unexpected termination of Genghis Khan's conquests in Europe, it is only conditionally a historical novel. Above all, it is an allegory of the clash of civilizations, an exaltation of the desire for understanding that arises alongside the urge to conquer, and which ultimately conquers that urge. Even while addressing distant ages in a poetic way, it is an insightful message for the troubled modern day. And didn't those messages exist even earlier? At their allegorical hearts, Baturin's works *Caught in a Vicious Circle* (*Ringi vangid*, 1996), *Apocalypse Anno Domini* (*Apokalüpsis Anno Domini*, 1997), the aforementioned *Centaur* and *A Fern in the Stone*, but also *The Way of the Dolphins* (*Delfiinide tee*, 2009), possess a humanist concern about both inner calcification and humanity having arrived at the brink of ecological catastrophe.

It may be true that only readers familiar with the unique aspects of Baturin's poetics found in his earlier and "more expressively-written" full-length novels (*The Heart of the Bear, Timid Nikas, the Comber of Lions' Manes* and *Centaur*) can find affinity with his later works, which abound in pauses for thought and allegory. At the same time, there are also those who feel the urge to embark upon explorations of his heftier novels only after enjoying the author's thinner (in terms of volume, but not necessarily content) works. There are readers who are intimidated by fragmentation and doubt the existence of connections within his works: based on personal conversations I've had with Baturin, I can assure these people that, in his mind, the works are assembled finely and meticulously. It is marvelous how he can speak about what he has written by heart and for hours on end, not forgetting even the slightest detail. Thus, in addition to everything else (or perhaps foremost), Baturin is a great storyteller.

With its extensive linguistic scope, its myriad of dialectal speech and neologisms, and its plays on words and names, Baturin's writing poses an extremely difficult challenge for translators. Few have had the courage to accept this challenge. Even so, further opportunities for the impossible may lie in going for it: chances are that a translation of his work will expand and enrich a much larger literary language, that a reclusive writer hailing from a peripheral culture might turn out to tell tales and conjure poetic Avarilmad – broad worlds – to which people all across a troubled and fractured world can relate. It is in these opportunities for the impossible that literature's lasting magic can be found.

BERK VAHER (1975) is an author and literary critic. He has written four short story collections and the novel *The Epic Story* (*Lugulaul*, 2002), which is regarded as one of the most outstanding works of postmodernist Estonian literature. Vaher also spends his time writing music reviews and as a DJ.

The Estonian Circumciser

by Mihkel Mutt · Excerpt translated by Adam Cullen

With **Mihkel Mutt**'s (1953) first novel since his hefty work *The Cavemen Chronicle* (2012), the unparalleled master of Estonian irony has emerged from the haze of the past, shrugged off the burden of memory, and committed himself to making sense of the present. There is a glint in the author's eye and a noticeable spring to his step as, speaking through a well-balanced array of voices, he questions the concepts of nationality, identity, and pride from within, without, and on multiple levels: personal, regional, national, and continental. Mutt asks what has become of the notion(s) of Europe, observes the trajectories of its central cities and small, provincial nations, and draws parallels to and contrasts with the popular, often mistakenly interpreted historical understanding of Rome and the barbarians. Addressing a highly topical issue – migration (not only originating from outside of Europe's conceptual borders, but also to and from within) – his sarcastic wit is as acerbic as ever. Mutt has put the past to rest, and his writing clearly thrives here and now with a renewed zeal.

***THE ESTONIAN CIRCUMCISER* BY MIHKEL MUTT**

MIHKEL MUTT · PHOTO BY ANDRES PUTTING / SCANPIX

Prologue in Bruxelles

Two gentlemen discussing Eastern Europe·

[…]

The older man spoke, for the most part. He had a hairline streak of mustache, paper-thin earlobes that let the light pass through, and was entirely of gentlemanly stature otherwise, so it took only one glance at him to remark: "A diplomat, I presume!" There was an element of truth to this, as Ograc van der Velde had indeed started out as a career diplomat. Furthermore, his superiors had noticed his conceptual aptitude and promoted him to the "inner circle". Lately, he had been responsible for the former socialist countries and was considered to be the leading ideologist of several corresponding doctrines. He had just been appointed to lead the newest division, and the younger man was made his assistant. Therefore, he believed it necessary to acquaint the latter with a few fundamental truths.

Within the Eastern European Division (but also in the Curatorium, and even in the ECDU more broadly), there existed a concept of "Eastern-Europeanness". This term was not in the official parlance, but was used colloquially, and even then, it was employed humorously or with mitigating disclaimers to leave open the possibility that the speaker actually meant something different, and that things were "the exact opposite".

Only occasionally, furiously and with the loss of self-control, could someone lambaste that phenomenon and snap, for instance, that Eastern Europe is a pain in the ass (PITA).

There were definite (albeit unofficial) regulations at the Curatorium concerning how far one could go when making jokes at another's expense. For example, the rules on African countries were strict: under no circumstances was one allowed to say that they were a "pain in the ass", even if that was what they were. The remark was forbidden in the address of Muslims, Kosovans, Palestinian Arabs, Inuit, Australian Aboriginals, and a few others. In their cases one was to nod, smile broadly, and imply that behind it all lay the legacies of former colonizers, which are long like plutonium's half-life. Eastern Europeans had been counted among the almost-untouchables until just recently. Although there had been a shift in that domain as of late, it left its stamp on the two gentlemen's conversation.

"You do understand what I'm trying to say?" Ograc asked, grinding his teeth. Again! it flashed through his mind. I just don't know how to talk like a proper human being anymore. All I do is make admissions, indications… Yuck! The man's new subordinate was Janosz Securitate y Gasset, who had formerly been the Vice Secretary of Foreign Trade at the Balkan Economic Aid Group. When the legendary Van der Velde offered him the position as his personal aide, it meant a giant leap on the career ladder. Therefore, Janosz was brimming with eagerness to learn and remained deferentially quiet, waiting for the esteemed civil servant to continue. Van der Velde was, however, busy reflecting his anxieties.

"We are professionals, needless to say, and shouldn't turn every little thing over and over like a hot potato in our mouth," Ograc gushed in a stream of consciousness. True, that tendency was already old and ordinary. But the rifts were especially great with some

topics. And all things considered, he had once, at the very start of his career at the Curatorium, highly enjoyed that paraphrastic style. It had seemed like a secret tongue of the committed: intellectually rich and aristocratic. Later, he had simply gotten used to it. Recently, though, the manner of speaking had become increasingly disagreeable. I'm getting old, Ograc reflected. Man's tolerance for stupidity, intrigue, beauty, and everything else weakens year by year. Hah—I should really just pack it in for a while and fly off to Saint-Tropez… Nevertheless, Ograc was a professional who was familiar with several meditation techniques, and had devised contra-methods for overcoming these moments of weakness. He simply needed to focus his mind on something lofty and ideal, to consider mankind's higher merit, and his sense of responsibility would swiftly triumph over reluctance—his body would be flooded with fresh energy, as if a back-up mechanism had been triggered. Usually in such instances, Ograc would concentrate his thoughts on Cardinal Metternich.

"I'd like to direct your attention to one particular," he continued after taking a small sip of his White Russian. "Allow me to begin metaphorically. As psychiatrists are aware, some young women display an obsession with the fantasy that somewhere, there is a gentleman or even a prince, who has vowed to take her hand in marriage. They see themselves as Cinderellas, enchanted beauties, or who the hell knows what. They are dead-set on this idea and behave accordingly. This breeds astonishment, ridicule, scorn, and anger in those around them. For example, a girl like that will reject, so to say, "normal" marriage proposals from on high, citing the superior prospects she has imagined for herself. Ah, yes—there's something similar in Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire*, if you happen to be familiar." Gasset shook his head sheepishly and asked him to repeat the name, tapping it into his smart phone. "What causes an aberration of this type is not important right now. What does matter is the fact that some Eastern Europeans also possess the strange ability to identify with those, who they are actually not. We come across a particular kind of wishful thinking in their case; an altered sense of reality. Living in relative material poverty (compared with us, naturally) and having relatively little to offer in terms of an historical past or cultural riches (compared with us, once again, although there does exist a certain hierarchy among Eastern Europeans themselves, which is inarguably more prominent, and occasionally even equivalent in regard to, say, the former members of the dual monarchy), they love to speak out about Europe's "civilizing mission" and "the white man's burden". Oh, yes—they've even exhumed that corpse of an expression from apparently not the deepest of ideological graves."

Janosz Securitate y Gasset listened to Ograc in wonder. What cognitive range!

"Let us recall that they, again in a spectrum of stages and variations, were occupied for eight hundred years by Romance peoples, Eurasian nomads, Germanic tribes, and who all else. We observe how yesterday's subject," here, he cleared his throat, "I won't use the word "slave", might, figuratively, make a mess of it all. It seems that now, at a time when they should be bonded to civilized Europe by common values, they appear to support an outdated imperialistic desire to oppress the Third World. It's outlandish déjà vu! Their zeal is made comical by the fact that if you leave the wrongdoings of colonialism aside for a moment,

then the Brits and the French, the Dutch and the Spanish truly have been capable of projecting their power. They were peoples of accomplishment, all the same. Yet, these nations are not: first of all because the social climate has changed, of course, and secondly (and this is crucial right now), because they lack the resources and the prerequisites. And still, they come here and instruct us, the old cultural nations, how we should behave; they come to remind us of our own rules and inherited ideas. They rub it in that we must stay European!" Ograc drummed his fingers dramatically on his notebook computer.

"True, they don't do so bluntly or obtrusively, at least they haven't thus far, but there are signs that the situation is changing in tandem with the refugee crisis. Some have already occasionally remarked that the way this is going shows they lack a nursery. The comparison to children is entirely relevant. Those Eastern Europeans are a little ungrateful, and they will be until they grow up and realize all the good their parents have done for them. Alas, a pedagogical diagnostic of this kind is of no use at the present, for once again, according to the rules we ourselves have enforced, those big Eastern European children have the right to their own opinion."

A pigeon appeared next to the table, its head bobbing back and forth like a sewing shuttle, pecked at something on the ground, surveyed the area peppily, and doddered onward. An Eastern European! Janosz thought, and he blurted:

"Their likes should be put in reform school!"

His companion delicately ignored the outburst, and continued.

"They say they are back in Europe. What do they mean, "back"? Of course, a few of them—such as the Czechs and the Hungarians, even the Poles and some others, to a certain extent—were indeed a part of Europe. But not quite, all the same, especially if you account for logistics in earlier centuries. Back then, a few hundred kilometers was a tremendous distance. The Balts? How can you claim on the basis of twenty or so years (because that was how long they had their own countries between the two wars, all by the grace of the Brits), not to mention that these were years spent far on the periphery, that you're already a part of Europe! I realize that this rhetoric was necessary at the time to prop up the Balts' spirits. There's a teensy difference between breaking in somewhere and restoring a place that once belonged to you. Knowing that you used to be worth something helps you to make something of yourself again faster. But a sober observation makes it clear that they have never been in Europe, and are knocking on its door for the first time now."

"Yeah, where'd they get that idea?!" the younger man marveled. "By that logic, anyone can regard themselves as anyone!"

[...]

Watchers Across the Water

Old Mr. Woodpecker's grandson, his first-born Lauri's son Aigur, left his parents' house in the small German town of N. at a young age. Not after a falling-out, but to see the world and for self-development. First, he studied for a semester and a half at a college in Dessau, then traveled to Portugal and Brazil, from which he returned to Europe a year and a half later—to Italy, more precisely. Everywhere he spent some time, he expanded his education at any universities he was awarded scholarships to attend. He was also a poet, but earned money by translating travel guides for Estonian companies, since he was fluent in his father's native language (as he was in his mother's Lithuanian). He met Rehana at a Goa poetry festival where they were both performing. They developed a liking for each other, which evolved into a relationship. Rehana had studied culturology in France. She wanted to become a social scientist. They met twice more: in Bucharest and in Vienna.

Rehana:
I sat on the shore of the Bosporus and stared across the water towards Europe. There, there is peace, and it seems like the sun shines eternal. People are polite, and everyone has enough to eat and drink. I'd like to raise my kids there. There, crazy people won't gain power anymore. There, leaders don't stick you in jail if you say something about them that they don't like. You're not beaten to a pulp or raped for it.

A female friend of mine, a newspaper reporter, was flogged. I managed to run away. I don't desire a life like that. I get the sense that Europeans themselves don't always realize how lucky they are. They've gotten so used to peace and balance over the seventy years it's existed in most parts of Europe that they take it for granted. They're unable to imagine what it means to stand in line for bread for hours at a time; to fear for your life every day; to be afraid of the bombs enraged religious fanatics set off, one after another. Aren't peace and balance the utmost human necessity? Some complain that it makes a person too comfortable, and spoils them. But are fear and worry then better companions? Do they spoil one any less? In Europe, people live their sole, unrepeatable life more or less the only way it's possible to live one on this Earth. The majority of us who live here, on the other hand, have to be perpetually ready for this one and only life to go unusually and unnaturally—there's nothing we can be sure of. That's why I and many people I know want to go to Europe. Would I ever like to return? I don't know… No, of course I would, if life here was different. But isn't it possible, then, that one day a peaceful life will arise in this region of the world, too? That people will start to prefer democracy and everything will go the same way it did in Europe after the World War, once people had learned their horrible lessons? My intuition tells me that although peace will come, life will still never become similar. The people here are very different, in some ways; their enmities are different, and those will last for hundreds of years to come. I won't live long enough to see the end to them, in any case. And right now, I'm unable to change it. I want to live my sole, unrepeatable life in a normal world. I'm a person, too.

Aigur and I will meet soon, and we'll live happily ever after in Europe.

Aigur:
I sat in Lisbon and stared across the water. I thought about how I don't want to stay in Europe; I thought about how there is too little room and too little air here, and I'll suffocate. I thought about how it isn't quite the world my mother and father had dreamed about behind the Iron Curtain. People have turned lazy and idle, living solely for the present, or they've become armchair revolutionaries who search for a watch that's fallen into water not in the spot where it actually sank, but where the water is shallower.

Last week, I was in Venice. I was sitting on the shore—on the Lido—just like now, and staring across the water towards San Marco. That dazzlingly beautiful city, one of the former cradles of New Europe, is physically sinking and fading away in every sense, save one: it's become a theme park. As such, on the scale of the whole wide world, it is a symbol for all of Europe. Some Europeans are fatalists, who reckon that everything will go however it does. A portion of these comprises masochists in turn, and another portion is the nostalgics. On top of that, there are the utopians, who believe that good words will triumph over foreign forces, and compete in their shows of hospitality. Then, there are also the naïve, who see no difference between Venice and theater decorations. Therefore, they all love the city. There are very few sensible and sober-minded people. They would shut Venice down, would quarantine it and allow no more tourists and witnesses. That city's atmosphere and mood, its entire ambiance closes people's eyes and ears and dulls their wits. The people who visit Venice turn into lovers of fate. And thereby Europe's downfall, which is happening anyway, only gains momentum.

That lovely but tired city, the decadents' Mecca, which wells with the aura of an old world doomed to disappear!

It sounds crazy, but when I was sitting there on the Lido, I started drawing parallels to my father's childhood home—to a little town in the Estonian periphery, where as a child I spent many summers with my grandparents. It had been a rather important manufacturing center during the Soviet era; now, everything there's been downsized, is turning derelict, and life is drying up. Venice has gotten everything over the course of its history; Lower Yokelville hasn't exactly gotten anything yet, and nor will it ever. One might ask how these two things have anything in common. Yet they do all the same, because both are symbols of Europe fading away.

I want to leave Europe. Nothing's happening here anymore. It's a dying continent being drained of its vital sap. But what about those on their way here—won't they renew Europe? No, you can't pour new wine into old casks. And that's the only thing the migrants would do, in the best case. In the best case…

I've been considering it for a long time. I know that if I leave here, I won't come back again. Everything has to be broken off, severed. If I put roots down somewhere out there, then I can start from the beginning; I can keep on living. I decided I'm going to take that step.

How should I explain this to Rehana?

Aigur decided to call Rehana. He saw he'd received a text message:
"O Romeo, Romeo! wherefore art thou Romeo?"[1]

1 *A reference to Romeo belonging to the feuding Montague family – M. M. Shakespeare,* Romeo and Juliet, *Act II, Scene II.*

Book reviews

by Peeter Helme and Jürgen Rooste

EEVA PARK · PHOTO: PRIIT SIMSON / SCANPIX

EEVA PARK
LEMMIKLOOMADE PARADIIS
(PETS' PARADISE)

Tallinn, Verb, 2016. 239 pp
ISBN: 9789949984138

Eeva Park (1950) is one of those rare authors who is equally talented as a poet, a short story writer, and a novelist. She has an infallible ability to recognize what kind of story, idea, or imagery to use in which particular genre. Park wrote the novel *Pets' Paradise* (*Lemmikloomade paradiis*) in the autumn of 2016. At first glance, one might think it was meant primarily for other authors, reviewers, and literary enthusiasts: at the center of the plot is a young woman with lackluster literary interests who spends some time at a writers' house in Ireland. Yet, as is common with Park's writing, this picture is deceiving. Things are not necessarily what they seem, and the text's broader nature gradually unfolds, peering deep into the human psyche.

Pets' Paradise isn't a romance novel, although this may be a layer that is immediately revealed to the reader. True, the protagonist is in a writers' house, recalling in diary format her relationship with a complicated and dangerous, but nevertheless attractive man. Yet, it is not a work about a woman longing for a man.

Perhaps the novel's third and most important layer is its story of finding, understanding, and making peace with oneself. The process may sound short and simple when stated like this, but Park manages to present even the simplest things in a varied, deep, and well-considered way. Who are we to ourselves? What is the affect we have on others? And, what is perhaps most complex: how can we ever understand who we truly are in the face of superficiality and the deception of ourselves and others? How can we ever be capable of understanding and coming to terms with ourselves?

The positing of such questions and the quest for answers matches ideally with the milieu of the writers' house. What makes this even more intriguing is the kind of house described in the novel: a place governed by odd and very particular rules. The patron, an eccentric aristocratic woman, allows the writers who comprise the cast of characters to reside and write at her abbey-like Irish country manor, but only under the condition that they obey several rules that are stricter than usual: the occupants are forbidden from interacting with one another, from leaving the building, and from concentrating on anything other than their writing. What is there to do for a young woman who ends up there by chance: one who, in reality, lacks any literary ambitions or intentions?

By situating her heroine in these unusual circumstances, Park creates a unique opportunity to delve into the depths of the woman's soul. Though, to be exact, she allows the character herself to do so. Namely, the protagonist starts to write. To herself. Or is she writing to the world? As the book wraps up, it remains unclear what ultimately becomes of the manuscript the character wrote in the hopes of finding herself. As the protagonist leaves the house, she erases everything on her computer; whether this also includes the pages she wrote, excerpts from which are presented to the reader, is never confirmed.

And rightly so, for *Pets' Paradise* is a journey. It is a voyage into the main character's soul, but at the same time also into the reader's soul. The book's language is truly poetic: one pleasantly noticeable aspect is the stylistic difference between the narrator's voice and the protagonist's own writing, which feels more agitated and rough, yet is very sincere and invokes sympathy. Still, the style can occasionally come off as startling in its bluntness and rawness. Readers will find nothing grotesque or profane, but Park doesn't shy away from addressing even the most complicated of issues: domestic violence, crudeness and intrigue in human relationships, pain from the loss of a child, and humiliations that one can inflict upon another person. All that pain can be found in this work, and Park makes no attempt to sugar-coat the topics. Nor does she move in the other direction: she doesn't find it necessary to use profanity or obscenities, because what would be the purpose when life itself is already so complex, often cruel, and filled with deceptive, unfulfilled hopes and dreams?

Nevertheless, this doesn't mean *Pets' Paradise* is a work of angst. Park manages to keep the positive and the negative, the sad and the happy in check. Both poles exist in life, and often, it is only a question of perspective. Even though the book may appear sorrowful at times, this is not the case. It may be painful, but the pain that Park describes is mostly cathartic. And as the author herself

said at one book-signing event, even a love that has been lost and irrevocably fallen into the past is good and beautiful for one simple reason: because it existed. And that is undeniably worth something. **PH**

MAARJA KANGRO
KLAASLAPS
(THE GLASS CHILD)

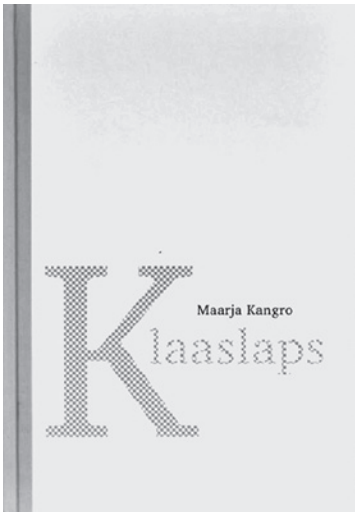
Tallinn, Nähtamatu Ahv, 2016. 208 pp
ISBN: 9789949813629

Maarja Kangro (1973) has been one of the most important Estonian prose writers and strongest short story authors of the last ten years. She masterfully binds short fiction with a first-person narrator similar to the author herself: Kangro's protagonists are, for the most part, strong, intelligent young women with a slightly cynical attitude, and brusque natures and words. They tend to fall more towards the "masculine" side of relationships. Their view of these relationships is sarcastic, but not bereft of hope or romance. Kangro's weapons are dark humor, twists, and life's unexpected tremors.

As a poet, Kangro has increasingly concealed herself: she probes language and finds devices that she can interweave and resolve. Kangro simply doesn't want to give away the keys to her poetry. Or – as a pleasant conversation partner in poetry – she regards the "other" to be more intelligent than they really are. One shouldn't forget that Kangro also translates severe poetry: the most significant authors she has handled over the last few years include Hans Magnus Enzensberger and Giacomo Leopardi.

The Glass Child is Kangro's first longer work of prose. It's quite an unforgiving book, and its ability to inflict pain knows no bounds. It can periodically be physically difficult to read, and can jar the reader far more than a piece of male-written transgressive literature that plays with the boundary between violence and porn. Kangro's tools and topics are different, and she treads much farther. Through autobiographical storytelling, she exposes personal pain that can only be something other than dismal and distressing in the literary form. Here, we can even question the bounds of literature. It has been said that *The Glass Child* is not a work of literature, but rather a diary, a therapeutic means of self-help. Still, that has long been the case with literature: words, language, life, and what is written nip and scratch at each other. But they never actually get hold of one another… The late 20th century and the beginning of this one have greatly been an era of autobiographers. How we evaluate this phenomenon on an aesthetic dimension is another matter altogether.

In *The Glass Child*, we encounter "real characters" occupying the Estonian cultural space who are recognizable to a large number of readers. The book is filled with life events described realistically and naturalistically. Kangro has said that the need to write down a story can be taken as an experience of solidarity, and without a doubt *The Glass Child* is, in some sense, a therapeutic book. When a woman is forced to terminate a pregnancy (because the child's skull isn't developing and its brain will be flushed away in the amniotic fluid) and then reads everything the depths of the Internet have to offer about it, finding support for even a fleeting moment, or else something to chuckle over, to even joke about in bemusement (Kangro gives a good deal of consideration to the Christian



MAARJA KANGRO · PHOTO BY KARIN KALJULÄTE / SCANPIX

worldview and how its followers perceive the harmony between such an immense, emotionally-draining tragedy and the divine), then she really might feel the urge, need, or even obligation to write everything down. Nevertheless, *The Glass Child* isn't solely for those who have previously or are currently experiencing something similar: it is a book about human misfortune in the world and standing face to face with a void. Yes, the work questions the reasons for and the point of our existence. It asks these questions through a prism of immense pain and loss. Kangro hasn't lost her main weapon here, her means of survival: the author's coal-black humor is more difficult to stomach than ever before in her writing.

But at the same time, she captures much more in her stories. Kangro ends up touring through wartime Ukraine and details differences in cultures and understandings (an Italian hospital, Italians' Catholicism, Spaniards' driving habits, the work ethics of journalists and doctors, etc.). Kangro's blunt descriptions and frank observations of medical personnel are quite universal. Respect and love must always go both ways in that system. (An odd digression: during the 1980s, it was said that doctors were at the head of Estonia's intelligentsia. Many of them were well-read and gave public statements on social issues. Even more significant was the proportion of doctors among the founding fathers of Estonia's literary culture: even the author(s) of the Estonian national epic were doctor(s)! Nowadays, I suppose there isn't time for that anymore: the doctor-patient relationship resembles a customer service situation.)

The most important facet of *The Glass Child* is also the most difficult to discuss. Kangro is exceptionally open and painful in terms of what she herself feels throughout the whole process as a woman, a mother, and a patient. She naturally expresses the physical experience, but primarily conveys mental observations and opinions. No, Kangro doesn't avoid being critical, and in doing so, she has discovered a succinct, cleansed, and occasionally even repellent style.

Of course, it's possible to view *The Glass Child* as a kind of confessional book. In some sense, it's even a castigation of society and everything surrounding the author: of how small and insignificant, trivial and

pitiful political and poetic tomfoolery is compared with a situation in which a life that has sparked inside of you must die. And Kangro does so demandingly, seeming to make the reader choose, take responsibility, speak the words, and sign on the dotted line: yes, I support death.

Kangro writes to us about staring into darkness and the void. Through the words she puts on paper, she takes us somewhere hopefully no one will ever actually have to go. The glimpse has been taken for us, and it is merciless – *The Glass Child* offers no consolation. Yet, it does convey a kind of strange inner force; at times maybe even a force of desperation. And is that literature? It sure is: dreadfully harsh and harrowing literature. Very few texts have this kind of an effect. The world isn't a great place and books like these can't make it better, nor is that the intention. Still, one can put on a pair of magic glasses for a while and look beyond the pain; can understand that in that place there are no standards or measures: there is only the sharing of experience.

Kangro's work is dangerously religious in the sense that it posits theological questions in the severest of ways. No matter – Kangro has the right to do so. **JR**

KATRIN JOHANSON

ATLANTIS ABAJAS
(ATLANTIS IN A COVE)

Tallinn, Varrak, 2016. 160 pp.
ISBN: 9789985337967

Katrin Johanson's (1972) entrance onto the Estonian literary scene was tied to the Estonian Writers' Union's novel-writing competition. One could even say that next to the contest's prize-winners, her writing career has been one of the best success stories, and also proof that these creative competitions are exceptionally necessary in today's world, where everyone seems to be writing something. Yes, writing is happening, but a portion of outstanding texts misses out on recognition because the authors don't receive the right kind of feedback at the right time: feedback, which this competition provides for its participants.

Katrin Johanson, who is a teacher in the town of Viljandi in southern Estonia, entered two manuscripts in the 2015 novel competition. Neither of them were selected as winners or marked for special recognition. However, they did catch the attention of jury members, who encouraged the author to develop the texts further. The material was promising, which is confirmed by the fact that both of Johanson's novels have now been published.

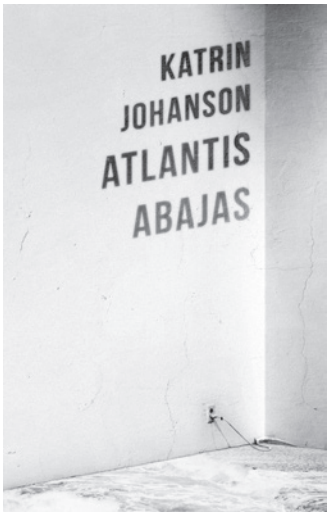
Johanson is an author who dares to handle difficult and uncomfortable issues. Her debut novel, *Crossable Rooms* (*Läbikäidavad toad*, 2015), represents in a way the big trend that has dominated Estonian literature over the last couple decades, and especially over the last couple of years: memoir prose that attempts to understand and interpret the twists of 20th-century Estonian history. Like Jan Kaus, Holger Kaints, and Ilmar Taska (to name just a few Estonian authors who have dealt with the same problems), Johanson dives into the time before, during, and after World War II, posing questions that very obviously torment Estonians' collective self-awareness: why did everything go the way it did, what was Estonians' own role in the course of a history directed by big powers and totalitarian dictators, and what

could have gone differently? Given the continuing stream of literature being written on these topics, it should be clear to every Estonian reader by now that there is no plain and simple answer to such questions – something that in turn enables authors to keep on writing works about 20th century history, and to write them intriguingly. It seems that Johanson is highly capable of handling the latter aspect, i.e. intriguing writing. She is an author who is able to create psychologically thrilling but convincing and believable human personalities. One might say that Johanson's writing doesn't offer anything truly new or extraordinary on the historical-philosophical scale, but that probably isn't her goal, either. Rather, her intention and achievement is the creation of gripping characters, both in their repulsiveness and their ability to make the reader relate to them. What's more, in both of Johanson's novels, she manages to weave these two seemingly contradictory aspects into single characters.

While the author focuses on 20th century Estonian history through the perspective of one family in *Crossable Rooms*, she takes a different approach in *Atlantis in a Cove*. The latter is set in the present day and focuses on fascinating psychological types, who are simultaneously very attractive and frightening. Johanson tells a story of love and hate that unfolds in a school in a small Estonian town. To be more precise, it is the story of a strange love triangle that revolves around a female teacher. Battling for her attention are a male colleague and a student with an obvious personality disorder. Without pussyfooting around the subject, the student can probably be called a psychopath, because in spite of his young age, he is highly adept at manipulating people.

And so, Johanson undertakes an extremely sensitive and problematic tangle of issues. She speaks about love, about the protagonist's journey of self-discovery that ultimately leads him to Greece (migration is likewise a reality in contemporary Estonian society, and is a complex and relatively politicized topic), and about psychiatric problems.

Despite the complexity of this web of topics, the author manages to resolve problems insofar as these types of problems are solvable. Several questions are naturally left hanging, but not because of the author's inability to answer them. On the contrary,



KATRIN JOHANSON. PHOTO BY ELMO RIIG / SCANPIX

Johanson wishes to show that it would be naïve to expect a single literary work to provide universal prescriptions. Nevertheless, the story is only a story, one about persons removed. The extremely vibrant and credible characters' lives begin long before the novel does, and they carry on even after it has ended. Luckily, the story concludes somewhat more peacefully, with the characters' lives perhaps even happier and more worth living. There are problems that can't be solved by literature or life itself, though it is possible to describe them in a way that helps readers move on with their own lives much better, and to strive to understand themselves as well as others. Johanson pulls this off fantastically. It's wonderful that an author with such a voice has made a powerful appearance in Estonian literature, and one can only hope that she will continue just as strongly as her first two novels promise. **PH**

LAURI SOMMER

LUGUSID LÕUNAST. 2012–2016
(STORIES FROM THE SOUTH. 2012–2016)

Tallinn, Menu Meedia, 2016. 200 pp
ISBN: 9789949549436

Estonian literary enthusiasts' first memories of Lauri Sommer (1973) date back to the late 1990s, when he was a poet in the literary group Erakkond. Later, he became a quirky bard and a wandering wizard, who walked around with a small tape recorder, looping the sounds he picked up. Sommer has also researched in depth the famous Estonian theologist, ethnologist, and poet Uku Masing (1909–1985). He has successfully made Masing's poetry, which is sometimes cumbersome, accessible even to those who initially can't relate to the writing. More recently, Sommer has been a prosaist. His works contain such a dense intertwining of life and storytelling digressions that it's a serious challenge for the reader to figure out how they should be pulled apart.

Stories from the South is woven into a mythological framework: as a young man, the author's voice (or the book's first narrator) walks around extensively, carrying a tape recorder, recording seniors' stories. Now, he has typed the tales out and formed them into a book. As he remarks: "I suppose some people took advantage of my youth and just spun their yarns and shot the breeze. They told whoppers so big that I couldn't even tell what was true. Or were they whoppers? Who can say?". Readers don't have to scratch their heads and wonder, but can just allow Sommer's world and narrative to carry them along. One thing is certainly noticeable over the course of the book: the storyteller(s) has (have) a unique poetic way of speaking, a way of perceiving and describing the world, and a kind of swell that carries the texts along.

The plots take us to the shores of Lake Peipus and Lake Lämmijärv: to Old Believer country, populated by the Seto, Võro, and Mulk peoples; to Estonia's eastern and southeastern arc. Language itself is one of the book's most fascinating characters: the setting of each story determines the tongue, in which it's told. A Northern Estonian translation is essentially given for the roughest of South Estonian dialects and languages, but these texts still barely correspond to the official written language. What's more, the translation doesn't always correspond word-for-word to the "original": some sentences or passages probe, and may even omit or add something.

LAURI SOMMER · PHOTO BY LIIS TREIMANN / SCANPIX

The South Estonian world itself exists in tactile times (since many of the speakers lived in this reality, or should still be alive today), but it does so in a magical space. Icon thieves are struck by a divine force, which firstly protects the holy items by gnawing at the wrongdoers' consciences, and then inflicts physical punishment. Grain ghosts arrive at a sinful kolkhoz village with the first bread made from the damp and undernourished fall harvest, make the villagers go crazy, and afterward sentence each to his or her retribution. In another village, an unknown force is unleashed at a large celebration, causing the dead to rise from their graves and come to resolve their unfinished fights and unpaid debts once and for all. Souls wander, doors open to other worlds, and objects transform into shapes or sounds seen or heard only by certain characters.

This world is somewhat similar to that of Mehis Heinsaar, whose stories also contain bizarre little Estonian towns where magic has not yet vanished. Both authors' stories contain physically realistic and painful escapades, tiny exact details, and historical truths that paint life in all its genuine glory… all just to ride off on a mystical, religious detailing of everyday magic or a telling of strange occurrences.

In both Sommer's and Heinsaar's stories, characters often bring punishment or suffering upon themselves as a consequence of their thoughtlessness or laziness. The failure to complete something or getting too stuck in a certain passion can eat away at the protagonists' lives, and their own greatest wishes may turn out to be their punishments. As the book's final voice – the eccentric old bachelor, poet, and bookworm Homer Siska, who accidentally starts receiving Magellan's spiritual radio broadcasts straight into his body, mind, and soul – says: "On the "Midnight Program" public radio talk show, a cybernetician talked about how human lives are like an automatic self-launching and self-running computer programs. Everyone has lines of tasks and conditional reactions coded into their genetic material. One of these might be set off by some small event that isn't even noticed by the people present for it. People rarely know what their own rows of code hold in store for them. Perhaps only one out of a thousand is capable of changing their material".

For some reason, this reminded me of a poem by one of Estonia's most interesting female poets, Triin Soomets, which was published in the literary magazine *Vikerkaar*: "start loving yourself at once / otherwise you'll be beat to it / and you won't understand / what he does".

Sorcery must be believed and one should live within it, otherwise it won't work. That's why we have fairy tale tellers: to keep it alive. If people don't talk or think about magic anymore, then it'll slowly die out. It'll be lost like an old book you discover in the attic: once you rush over to it and pick it up excitedly, it disintegrates into fragments that have been chewed up and defecated on by generations upon generations of rats. Are some of those stories being chewed up by parasites in the walls when the winter cold becomes bitter once again?

At the end of the book, "Magellan's radio" (see Uku Masing's work *The Envoy from Magellan's Cloud* (*Saadik Magellani pilvest*)), which can broadcast straight into a person's mind if the right buttons are pushed, repeats an old Estonian saying: "Don't pull your heart out before others, and you'll have a more peaceful life". But no poet, storyteller, or bard can really do that, of course: he or she is destined to inflict this self-punishment, tearing off little bits or strips of their heart in order to cast spells on people. It makes our existence a strange one and adds magic to the world, because magic is the very glue or adhesive that binds life together. But I suffer from it, too… Quite the little dummy I am. **JR**

TARMO TEDER
ANDRUSE ELU JA ÕNN (ANDRUS' LIFE AND JOY)

Tallinn, Eesti Keele Sihtasutus, 2016. 102 pp
ISBN: 9789985796795

Tarmo Teder (1958) is one of Estonia's best storytellers, and an old-school writer in the very best sense. He is loquacious and a good short story author, but has also sparred with longer prose, and even writes poetry on fair days.

Teder's short story collections have frequently come from a sense of place: his pieces are coupled with a particular site, neighborhood, house, street, or rural area. He is a detailed, realistic storyteller whose works often convey the grungier or more bizarre aspects of life in Estonia. His characters are ordinary people, not heroes. Teder also loves to interlace chesslike plot resolutions into his stories: he is a fan of good twists, juicy language, and rich, satisfying descriptions…

Andrus' Life and Joy is, on the one hand, a genuine example of Teder's style: specific places play a clear role in the short novel or story or extended novella (pecking away at the limits of genre seems to be one of the favorite topics of Estonian literary theory). He gives special attention to a small island off Estonia's western coast, but also to the atmosphere inside a Tartu jail and to life in other small towns and the countryside. Another important part of *Andrus' Life and Joy* is Teder's lengthier, more philosophical description of Europe's capital city, Brussels, which the protagonist, already an old man, visits on his first longer trip abroad – a trip to the European Parliament

to see his estranged daughter. Teder's classic, characteristic manner of storytelling is vividly present here: he relishes every sentence as he paints a backdrop for the story, and sometimes even a second or a third. The author colorfully quilts snapshots of tiny occurrences together with quotes and historical parallels: the novel's plot, which is comprised of one man's life, meshes with a small country's fate. The book is so script-like that it's unfortunate Teder hasn't been hired to work on any films dealing with 20th-century Estonian history: *Andrus' Life and Joy* is strikingly visual and narrative, and some sections seem to be made for the big screen!

Still, there is something much greater here: the biography of a man living on a small island, extending from the Soviet era to the most recent of events (the book doesn't end with the protagonist's death, but with the start of a new life: an ending so optimistic that it's un-Estonian, and even un-Teder-like!), is a unique kind of manifesto. Yes, Teder intends for it to cast an ordinary, serious, headstrong man's gaze and judgment upon Estonian life as a whole. His intention is political, judgmental, liberal, and stubborn: everything, which literature (that blossoming and social-critical thing) has been able to allow itself over time.

I know of no better concise contemporary Estonian history lesson than this. While Teder briefly, in the middle of the book, gets perhaps overly hung up on describing the course of the economy (though only for a short time, and justifiably so, since the small-island fisherman becomes a "businessman" in early-1990s Estonia, just like almost everyone else), it's actually an intriguing glimpse: a panorama of "Little Estonia", recognizable to those who experienced it. Such was the life of an ordinary rural resident in the Soviet era, and such was the end of that country through his eyes. Such was how capitalism came. Such was how people in Estonia drank, and still drink. Such was precisely how banks' forecasts and front-page newspaper stories about economic depression affected the lives of simple folk. Oh, and so has life changed in our prisons!

Teder has penned the history of a marvelous little man, a little Estonian. But not only that! He shows us life's materialist burden, economic depression and the power of alcohol and the frailty of love, the hopelessness

TARMO TEDER · PHOTO BY SVEN ARBET / SCANPIX

of love – and even so, he leaves us hope! It is an idealist piece of fiction aimed at the materialist world and Estonia's inevitable fate, one with its feet deep in the mud and within life itself.

Andrus, the main character, realizes that his celebrity namesakes - a famous skier, a beloved writer, an oafish prime minister - are also the milestones of Estonian life. His own name has a dash of added significance, as it resembles the name of the greatest seeker of truth and justice in Estonian literature: Andres Vargamäe in A. H. Tammsaare's pentalogy *Truth and Justice* (in Teder's case, the protagonist's full name is Andrus Kadakavälja, i.e. Andrus "Juniperfield", and those junipers are quite the tough, gnarled trees).

For the positivist searching for the stories' causes and backgrounds in the author's own life, Teder is a tough nut to crack: he comes from an island, just like his protagonist, but there is much more to him than that. He is an avid fisherman and chess player, and both activities are very important in the story. Teder's other hobbies are also mentioned in passing: football and pottery, which is a skill he acquired late in life. Just like the author once did, Andrus feigns insanity to avoid conscription in the Soviet army; however, the circumstances and method are different. Teder has acknowledged with a chuckle that, without fail, readers tend to regard the true events in his books as being made-up, and vice versa. This is an exciting fact and adds more liveliness to his writing: something, which is already in great supply.

Actually, even the murkiest wordplays and the scenes most distant from the writer's own life still tell us something about him: we can positivistically poke around in even the greatest abstractionist's art. It's simply a way to plant more stories between the stories: for no matter how thrilling Andrus' life and happiness might be, Teder himself is a serious thriller and a work of art. Yet, readers don't need to know this to understand his writing.

For everyone who grumbles that contemporary Estonian books lack vibrancy: here! This is a story about capitalism's birth in Estonia and in a man, as well as about overcoming that illness. It is a beautiful, masculine, and even conservative story strongly grounded in values. It's simply a good, moving tale with a twist, just like Teder always gives us, so I won't reveal the ending... **JR**

TRIIN SOOMETS

VALITUD OMADUSED
(CHOSEN QUALITIES)

Tallinn, Tuum, 2016. 327 pp.
ISBN: 9789949979424

Chosen Qualities is the second collection of selected poems by Triin Soomets (1969). The first, *Vein* (*Soon*), was published 16 years ago. The title of this newest collection is a reference to her 2013 poetry collection *The Qualities of Things* (*Asjade omadused*), as well as her 2009 book *Hidden Elements* (*Varjatud ained*).

Soomets has said that there was no thematic or message-based impulse for this "best of" selection, but rather a purely perfectionist, aesthetic endeavor to pick out the very best. Soomets' debut in Estonia's poetry scene took place when the Soviet era was crumbling into the restoration of independence. The publication in question was

TRIIN SOOMETS · PHOTO BY PRIIT SIMSON / SCANPIX

an outstanding boxed collection of poems by female authors, in which several other Estonian writers of contemporary prestige made their debuts. Among them were the well-known poet and prosaist Elo Viiding (then Elo Vee); Liisi Ojamaa, the spokeswoman for Estonian romantic-lyrical punk; as well as Aidi "Ats" Vallik, who has written some of Estonia's most significant youth novels. Also included in the collection was Ruth Jyrjo, who hasn't been heard of much since then (although her first collection was in no way weak). It was the last Estonian group debut, a belch of freedom in the final days of the USSR, until the late 1990s, when there was a wave of new literary groups and joint collections. Many people read the collection as teenagers and without critical attitudes, amazed. The diverse poetic arsenal was a hellish carousal of Estonian poesy, especially since apart from a few punk-poetry collections, very little important or striking poetry was published in Estonia during the mid-1990s (not even two or three collections of lasting importance were released between 1991–1997).

In a sense, Soomets was counted back then, based on her first collections, among the "greats" of Estonian female poetry. Luckily, that discussion or debate has never been concluded, meaning that it can't be taken as a punishment. In short, we can measure Estonian poetry history with the giant footsteps of Lydia Koidula: comparing them to those of Anna Haava, Marie Under, Betti Alver, Debora Vaarandi (with Minni Nurme on the side), Doris Kareva (with Viivi Luik between or next to them), and now… Triin Soomets? Her quarter century of impressive poetry collections certainly deserve that ranking! And does the Alver-like Eda Ahi also fit into that space? Or the rebellious Sveta Grigorjeva? Grigorjeva would hardly want it personally, though the topic interests her and her writing lies far from generalization and regulation… Where does Elo Viiding, who debuted with Soomets and has been sovereign in Estonian literary history, fit in with her harsh, entirely unique, and hardened voice? What about the poisonous, anti-image Fagira D. Morti? It's true that the women listed here are all too fascinating to properly measure them with the notion of "Estonian female poetry": they are great, lyrical poets whose broad reach conjures metaphors, and who find the right rhymes for our existence… But each of these

poets' more interesting sides lie somewhere else: there, where they aren't attributes of national poesy.

Triin Soomets is, in this sense, an uncontrollable chemical; an independent radical. Her poems' eroticism is dark, her mood is often one of loneliness, and her locution is abrasively decadent, corporal, and sometimes even bloody – even wine-like. She is more the ward of a Baudelaire-like world: a sad modernist-symbolical loner…

At the same time, a kind of perfectionism beats within Soomets. She polishes and polishes her choices, wishing to arrive at an ideal phrasing. Soomets can't be blamed for doing so, of course, but it might not appeal to readers, because readers like the temptation of frailty and restlessness: we never want to read the best poesy, for we love a bird with a broken wing: "How far the Word extends, / how blunt pain can be – / evening descending, the corner unsharpened, / bare-handed / into war. None to be had. / Smoke from the left drawer, / a death-white envelope, / spider's silver. / If only there was desire. / For another time? / Then with other words".

No, no – Soomets is no poetry-führer, and her recent years working as a yoga instructor may certainly be a kind of progression of her inner poetry-ego. Soomets' poetry contains its own lesson.

In this lesson, a strange peace and ability to generalize interweave with restive eroticism and edgy questioning: thus, the poet destroys the reader's block of principle, ignorance, and shield. Soomets relentlessly questions, doubts, and hesitates. She expresses anxiety, suppressed rage, and an injured woman's deepest meditative regime very well: that, which at first seems irrational to others. As time goes on, it's increasingly tied to an even deeper, more inner practice of silence, which nevertheless bursts out delightfully on occasion:

"he didn't believe I loved him / if I didn't love everyone else simultaneously / otherwise it's just vanity and possessiveness / so I started loving everyone else like I was crushing stones / no I couldn't by force / then loving everyone else like picking flowers / that was killing and acquiring / everyone else like feeding children / that was belittlement and humiliation / others like honoring the sun / that was creating false expectations / like playing music / that was a little closer / finally I thought I'd found the right way – do you believe me now / no, you still don't love that child-killer and those two greedy women / the one who teased you in 7th grade or those rapists / I started to / do you believe me now / he didn't believe I loved him / if I didn't love myself simultaneously / otherwise it's just vanity greed and possessiveness / so I started loving myself like I was crushing stones etc / do you believe me now / then he did / and then I no longer cared".

One should trust the author: *Chosen Qualities* is Soomets' perception of herself as a poet. Here, she doesn't follow the tastes of reader-demographics, but rather her understanding of the poetry as it has developed over 25 years. Serious labor and painful growth lies behind it. The most important ingredient of all here is honesty: a poetic honesty and genuineness while standing face-to-face with yourself. Soomets consciously selected the qualities of which she is composed at an early age. That shows

mental progress and practice. Yet poesy is often dirtier, so we must go back to the sources and purposefully read exactly what the author abandoned in her perfectionism. **JR**

BILLENEEVE

SÜGIS NAGU LÕPPEV SUHE (AN AUTUMN LIKE AN ENDING RELATIONSHIP)

Saarde-Pärnu, Jumalikud Ilmutused, 2015. 60 pp
ISBN: 9789949519484

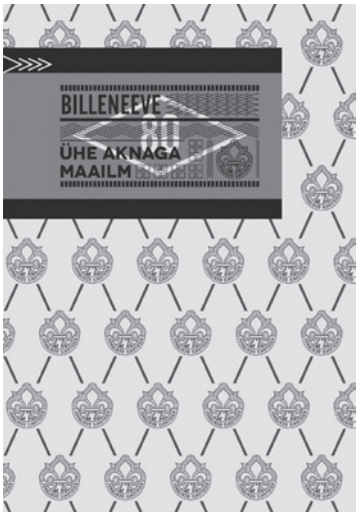
ÜHE AKNAGA MAAILM (A ONE-WINDOWED WORLD)

Saarde-Pärnu, Jumalikud Ilmutused, 2015. 60 pp
ISBN: 9789949519538

Billeneeve (the pen name of Pille Neeve, 1975) is a baroque, exuberant, loony, jovial, sexual performance artist. She is a phenomenon that shocks society and her environment with her presence; a positive explosion; a being who transforms or warps the space around her into art. She is also one of the most exciting new poets of the last couple of years. As a poet, she is a "different kettle of fish".

Fellow poet Sveta Grigorjeva says that Billeneeve's writing is "disconsolate sleeper-suburb poetry of the post-industrialist world." Yes, Billeneeve's sense for poetry is somehow Eastern, haiku-like. She is conscious of the urban environment around her: Tallinn's concrete-block "ghetto" of Lasnamäe (which is thoroughly familiar to Grigorjeva, also, and is now greening once again), Estonia's not-at-all-rosy social situation, and filthy, lost love reminiscent of nature. She sees the abandoned tram stops and the underground cisterns as being strange temples or holy sites. And within all of this is a dose of irony from a practical woman, who is consciously present in real-life processes: "ESTONIANS FEAR // daylight because / opening the closet, // the clothes on the skeleton / might be dirty". It's not hard to guess that these lines refer to Estonians' (almost national) false shame and duplicitous morals.

When I say that Billeneeve's perception of life is haiku-like, Eastern, concise, and tends to avoid longer wording, then it's possible that she might have a place in contemporary Japanese poetry, which is rebellious against canon. Her collections contain a kind of anti-haiku (which are thereby simply haikus in a



BILLENEEVE. PHOTO BY MAILIS OLLINO / SCANPIX

renewed spirit). In this "new" haiku world, nature as haiku-material, as firewood, has already been burned up and worn down. The observations (which are the basis for any kind of poetry or literature, even if it's self-observation) have been made and are very abraded, but are also somehow new and fresh from being worn wax-paper thin: "and now when I look / at all the nature pictures / a different way / and see that sad // decomposing season / well no wonder / nature's been mercilessly photographed away".

Still, a particular pantheist, religious way of thinking surfaces in Billeneeve's poetry. Because of its linguistic space, Estonian has a Lutheran background, meaning that nature is to be compared or contrasted to God: to an imagined cultural, intellectual, and patriarchal sole spirit. As a result, Billeneeve's path from the perception of nature to the cognition of religion is intriguing: "when I feel bad / I always think of / nature or I step / outside into a wasteland / littered with construction debris / and then I feel I'm / just as powerless and alone as / nature is against mankind / and I start to feel better / because I'm no longer / alone".

In one respect, she takes a realist attitude close to the land (with her feet on the ground, so to say). In another sense, she allows God the same merciless gaze upon our existence in turn. Billeneeve's pantheism and her faith in humanity and nature laughs at itself, such as in a poem about the soul: "someone wants to / get out of me / whimper whimper whimper / you sure are clever / playing a dog / but I can't / let you out / for you won't come / back again". And at the same time, she acknowledges her religious pursuit and her choice, her head held high, steadying herself on the landscape – on nature, Lasnamäe's concrete expanses and human-dug tunnels, while mostly refraining from abasing what we have made in comparison with nature.

Billeneeve also situates her relationships, the lack of love or departure or loss or yearning or bright memories in landscape: in nature and in space, which turns into image. She lodges these things in realistic pictures, which acquire a much greater dimension through spatial imagery: "new nature / forms amid the stone settlement // mowed hill mustard / atop a september-morning / underground garage // burdock some bushes / metal clamps pounded into the ground / rust-brown clothes-drying / posts I suppose // someone's tried to make a / flowerbed on one side and planted / sunflowers // two worn paths cross / amid the garage roof // and remind me of my / one-night stands".

Financial pressure is added to this sadness. There are places where Billeneeve intersects with Kalju Kruusa, one of the most significant 21st-century Estonian poets, who in his harsh and sorrowful texts also touches upon the material lacking of human existence and on the gloom of getting by in flourishing, modern-day Estonia. Billeneeve's poetic world carries a hint of decay and loss, is a little worn and miserable, and her nature isn't always consoling, comforting, green, or meditatively soft. Her mediation has a sour stench, as well as the beauty of things turning sour and going slightly askew: "there's a bag in the corner / trash in it is screaming / let me outside let me outside / otherwise I'll stink / worse and worse / easy there darling I say / in a couple of minutes / you'll be with your kind / but keep in mind that / you'll never return to your / childhood home again".

Billeneeve's poetry seems to tell us: don't fear simplicity, simplicity doesn't exist – there is only the manner of poetry and the way in which you continually cast off layers; in which you search for the simplest words, stylistic webs, and stories in order to find contact with yourself. Make that "simplicity" your own. There's no way of knowing how many more poetry collections Billeneeve has in her, but it appears that she has her own place in contemporary Estonian poetry: that the way of perception we incorrectly call "Eastern" or "haiku-like" can acquire a very chilled, poetic, Estonian form. **JR**

PEETER HELME (1978) is a writer, essayist and journalist, and has published five novels. Helme works at Estonian Public Broadcasting, where he edits and anchors radio programmes on literature.

JÜRGEN ROOSTE (1979) is a poet, journalist, and one of the most renowned writers of his generation. He has published fourteen collections of poetry and received the Cultural Endowment of Estonia's Award for Poetry on two occasions, among many other recognitions.

Estonian culture and literature

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The topics and history of Estonian literature are introduced in the booklet **The World of Estonian Literature**, available in three languages. Twice a year the magazine **Estonian Art** is published, and a number of aspects of Estonian culture, from cuisine to national symbols are covered in special issues. Web encyclopedia **Estonica.org** has an extensive review of several aspects of Estonian society, nature and statehood.

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