

# Elm

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# 2012



# Elm

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# Indrek

## master of magic and murders

by P e e t e r H e l m e

**Indrek Hargla, 42 in the coming summer and the author of sci-fi, fantasy and crime novels, can now certainly be called a phenomenon in Estonian literature. Entering Estonian literature in the late 1990s with fantasy stories, followed shortly by novels in the same genre, Indrek Hargla quickly attracted attention among wider audiences and not just among fantasy and sci-fi fans.**

Hargla's debut novel *Baiita needus* (The Curse of Baiita) in 2001 received a special sci-fi award in a novel competition and was mentioned by the writer and critic Tarmo Teder in the annual prose overview in the magazine *Looming* in 2002. His name appearing in this article generally means that a writer has made it.

"This thriller, with an elaborate plot, is written fluently and within the boundaries of good taste," wrote Teder, and he even referred to another work by the author at the beginning of his literary career, *Pan Grpowski üheksa juhtumit* (Nine Cases of Pan Grpowski). It is a novel in the form of short stories, where the detective fights against mysterious forces. "Hargla is rather productive: future Estonian prose custodians will often have to deal with Hargla's books," summarised Tarmo Teder in his article.

Indeed, in the course of the subsequent 10 years, Hargla published about a dozen works. Most of them are novels, although he has also written some collections of short stories. In fact, Hargla's debut was not *The Curse of Baiita*, but a collection of short stories published a year before, *Nad tulevad täna öösel* (They Will Come Tonight).

Hargla's bulky, 400-page fantasy novel *Vabaduse kõrgeim määär* (The Highest

# Hargla

Degree of Freedom) achieved critical acclaim and became a best-seller. The book cleverly describes how people's desire for freedom turns into a trampling on others' freedom. In a way, this particular book and the earlier novels constituted a preparation for conquering the hearts of readers who were not fantasy freaks and sci-fi geeks. In Estonia in the 1990s and early 2000s, only a narrow circle of readers were really keen on these genres, and Hargla was the first author who dared stick his neck out of this circle to declare: sci-fi literature is in no way second-rate.

Hargla achieved this by producing ever more masterly fantasy and sci-fi books, which gradually gained popularity outside his narrow fan circle. He thus prepared the ground for the huge success of the trilogy *French ja Koulu* (French and Koulu).

French and Koulu. Who are they? The names seem rather idiotic. They are probably meant to be. These characters and the world around them, *Maavald* (in translation more or less identical with Tolkien's *The Shire*, here an archaic-poetic name denoting the whole of Estonia), can in general terms be compared with **Terry Pratchett's** work, although some parallels can also be found with the world of **Frances Hardinge's** novel for young adults, *Fly by Night*.

The action of French and Koulu takes place in a strange, medieval steam-punk Europe, where evil semioticians run around, muzzle loaders are being used, slavery is

flourishing and vast quantities of potatoes are eaten, to the annoyance of some characters. All of the deeds and characters, however, are shadowed by a perceptible, but ungraspable veil of dementia.

The trilogy appeared between 2005 and 2009 and was a roaring success, probably because Estonian readers found humour there, recognised themselves and saw clear parallels with contemporary life. People more familiar with sci-fi and fantasy perceived similarities with related literature elsewhere in the world and were pleased – our man is just as good as anybody else.

However, resting on his laurels is not Hargla's style. He could easily have "done a Pratchett", producing 30-40 more books about French and Koulu, and in the process perfect the universe he had created, and who knows – he might have made a name for himself internationally.

However, this is not what Hargla does. Despite his job as a lawyer at the Estonian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, he stands in contrast to the expected dullness, norms and routine. "I have always tried to write what I would like to read myself," he once said in an interview. "I have also tried to invent something interesting and original. Something that has not been done before, with a twist."

With amazing ease, Hargla cast everything aside and undertook quite a different work. It might just be that this will bring him success not only at home, but also abroad.

Two summers ago, Indrek Hargla published the crime novel *Apteeker Melchior ja Oleviste mõistatus* (Apothecary Melchior and the Ghost of Sternsod). The book had been vigorously promoted beforehand. Readers were looking forward to it. However, the colossal public success was still unexpected – the book stayed in the top ten for months.

This was the first crime novel in a planned series. The plot unravels in late medieval Tallinn in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, when the Hanseatic town was enjoying a boom. A U-turn? Almost, but not quite. Among his first works, after all, were short stories about the detective Pan Grpowski. Hargla has admitted that although he was interested in history it was not easy to write about it without having studied it professionally, because readers would not be fooled. Medieval Tallinn, however, was for him “an ideal location for a crime novel. There is mystery and a truly fascinating situation: monasteries, guilds, various brotherhoods, the town council and its political factions, merchants and their links with overseas towns.”

The apothecary is an ideal character as well: he travelled widely in his younger years, knew Latin and, according to medieval belief, treated not just people’s bodies, but their souls as well. So, all in all, this is a man with experience and a broad mind, who has dealings with nearly all the inhabitants of the relatively small Tallinn, i.e. approximately 4000 people.

Melchior Wakenstede resembles the famous character Hercule Poirot of **Agatha Christie**’s stories. Melchior also gathers all suspects in one room at the end of the story and then elegantly explains everything. The similarities are, however, superficial, as Hargla is an independent writer who has based the apothecary’s character on the archetypal man who seems mysterious to strangers but is nevertheless a man of flesh and blood.

One reason why these novels have become so popular is perhaps the fact that Melchior is rather down-to-earth, which prevents him from flaunting his knowledge and



Indrek Hargla (Photo by Scanpix)

sharp mind. Besides, the German apothecary has an Estonian wife, Keterlyn, who brings him back to earth. Every single Apothecary Melchior story has been enthusiastically received, and it is interesting to note that, with every new title, the previous books in the series always turn up on the best-seller list as well.

Before the first Melchior story, Hargla said he had not decided how many books there would be in the series – everything depended on how the readers received them. There is every reason to believe that he will not end his series any time soon. Especially now that the first book has been translated into Finnish and will soon be published in France.

# Works by Indrek Hargla

## **Nad tulevad täna öösel**

(They Will Come Tonight, 2000). His literary debut, consisting of 14 fantasy and sci-fi stories, where Hargla demonstrated his versatility.

## **Baiita needus**

(The Curse of Baiita, 2001). His first novel, full of intrigue and adventures, where the activities are controlled by a curse.

## **Pan Grpowski 9 juhtumit**

(Nine Cases of Pan Grpowski, 2001). A novel in short stories that became a cult book, where a Polish gentleman detective solves supernatural cases with supernatural powers.

## **Hathawareti teener**

(The Servant of Hathawaret, 2002). A fantasy-flavoured collection of a short novel and short stories.

## **Maris Stella**

(2003). A novel of alternative history about Joan of Arc, with an unexpected twist.

## **Palveränd uude maailma**

(Pilgrimage to the New World, 2003). Another book offering alternative history, where Hargla's imagination is magnificently given free rein: 16<sup>th</sup> century Europe has no Holy Roman Emperor Charles V, Martin Luther is a bishop and Spain is divided.

## **Vabaduse kõrgeim määr**

(The Highest Degree of Freedom, 2003). A fantasy novel about one nation's desire for freedom resulting in crushing the freedom of others.

## **French ja Koulu**

(French and Koulu, 2005). The first part of Hargla's trademark trilogy, where the sorcerer and spy Koulu and his slave French from Burgundy have numerous adventures in a hilarious and silly alternative world.

## **Roos ja lumekristall**

(Rose and Snow Crystal, 2006). A fantasy and sci-fi collection of eight short stories.

## **French ja Koulu Tarbatus**

(French and Koulu in Tarbatu, 2007). The familiar characters have to face and fight the evil semioticians in the university town Tarbatu, as well as other supernatural creatures.

## **Frenchi ja Koulu reisid**

(Travels of French and Koulu, 2009) Koulu, French, the werewolf-girl Nell and the poet Imbi do what is indicated in the title: they travel to Europe.

## **Apteeker Melchior ja Oleviste mõistatus**

(Apothecary Melchior and the Mystery of St Olaf's Church, 2010). In the first part of the series, Melchior Wakenstede must find a serial killer who is loose in 1410 in the Hansa town Reval, and whose motives become clear when Melchior reads old legends.

## **Apteeker Melchior ja Rataskaevu viirastus**

(Apothecary Melchior and the Ghost of Sternsod, 2010). In 1419 three people see three ghosts, and each dies more gruesomely than the last. Once again, the court bailiff turns to his old friend the apothecary in order to unravel the tangled web of events.

## **Apteeker Melchior ja timuka tütar**

(Apothecary Melchior and the Hangman's Daughter 2011). In the third part of the series, which is getting ever bloodier, a young man is found wandering around near the town in September 1422. He has lost his memory and is carrying a secret that can cost the lives of several people. As always, the apothecary is expected to clear up the mystery.

Indrek Hargla's short stories have also appeared in several collections, in the magazine Looming and in the collection of horror stories *Õudne Eesti* (Uncanny Estonia, 2005), which he compiled himself.

# A Poet Is a Donor

## Who Has to Give Blood

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b y Y e l e n a S k u l s k a y a

Yelena Skulskaya (Photo by Scanpix)



I think in every professional poet there are many more poems than he can write. The poet has a need – just like a donor giving blood does – to donate his accumulated melancholy, tenderness, resentment and bitterness. Yet, poetic thought and poetic cause are not always happily joined: the poems do not always HAPPEN. And it is this fermentation, this necessity of the poem that, given personal temporary dumbness, can touch a different-language text, a text that is very close to you, that could have possibly been written by you, yet you would have written it differently, and that the other poet has written like you could never have done, and still you feel that sensation of co-authorship, intimacy, affinity etc. That is to say, your inspiration and your craft seem to switch to an artificial breathing mode, to that apparatus that keeps you poetically alive. This apparatus, which replaces your heart, is the poetry you translate.

The very talented English-Russian translator Boris Nosik, who has brilliantly translated Evelyn Waugh's works into Russian and is a disciple of the great Right-Kovaleva, told me once: "I have been studying English for twenty-five years already; I do understand a lot." I have been studying Estonian all my life; understanding and feeling another language is more difficult for a poet than for a person not dwelling in language subtleties. I still cannot say I understand a lot, yet I do understand something: the rhythmical flow of a poem. I see its second and third plans, and I feel its strange language texture. This gives me the right to translate.

I don't know any good translations of poetry written on the basis of word-to-word translations. There was a vast school of translators in the Soviet Union, which was born mainly out of hopelessness: good poets were deprived of the opportunity to publish their own lyrical verse, and they could not and did not want to write at the demand of political circumstances, yet they were filled with poetic energy and so they engaged themselves in translations. Not only did they find a way to earn a living but, more importantly, they

exercised their craft, their natural need to organize their surroundings rhythmically. At that time, translations made from word-to-word translations were quite widely spread. Thus a literature of 'fraternal peoples' was created. Some of these peoples did not have written languages yet, only oral works. Anna Akhmatova, a poetic genius, undertook to translate using word-for-word scripts. Once I came across her translation of a poem by Debora Vaarandi, a prominent Estonian poet. The poem describes the island of Saaremaa. In the Russian language, if vowels are doubled each letter is pronounced separately and each has its own independent position in a word – thus the written and the oral variants coincide. Double vowels in the Estonian language mean there is a prolonged pronunciation of the first one, i.e. in writing if we see two vowels, we pronounce only one, slightly prolonging the sound. The oral and the written variants do not coincide: we prolong the oral sound long enough for the interlocutor to understand us and so that he doesn't mix this word up with another one in which the vowel is single and the sound, accordingly, is equally single. A translator knowing the Estonian language has to consider this detail, while someone who doesn't speak the language may not necessarily understand this point. There are lots of subtleties like that in Estonian. As a result, the genius Akhmatova came up with a rough and clumsy translation that deprived Vaarandi's poem of its lyrical charm, and the Russian reader wasn't given the gift of meeting a unique poet.

A good knowledge of language can also prove to be a disservice to a translator. He can suffer a slavish dependence on the original. He can start viewing the translated text from an underdog position, as though looking at one's boss. A translator as slave unavoidably ends up using calques, adjusting his language to a foreign language, and fawning upon the latter.

Estonian poetry, as well as European poetry in general, enjoys very liberal limitations on poetic structures. Poetry is comprised of everything: classic rhymed verse, free verse and prosaic essays with a hint of poetry. In Russian poetry, the limitations are much

sharper and clearer: prose cannot be considered poetry, and free verse poems, devoid of inner rhythms and consonance, are often considered second rate, as if they were sealed as translated texts (albeit from a non-existing language). The simplest thing is to translate Estonian poems while disregarding the rhythmical structure in Russian. In my opinion, though, this cannot be done. You have to strive for the same reaction in Russian that the poems have in Estonian. Often I add rhyme to non-rhymed poetry, string them on a clearer and more obvious rhythmic pattern, and adapt them to the laws of Russian poetry. The Nobel Prize winner Joseph Brodsky, who spent a lot of years translating, said in one of his interviews that on seeing another translator's rhymed version of some poems by an American author that had once been translated by him without any rhymes, he suddenly understood: that is the way it should have been done – a rhymed translation! As only in this way can the Russian reader appreciate the poet in the context of his principles.

The contemporary tradition of translating is rather comfortable, perhaps even lazy. Russian rhymed poetry, too, is translated into European languages practically in prose, disregarding rhyme, rhythm, assonance and alliteration. "If it isn't significant for my poetry," thinks a translator, "why should I retain all these rhythms and consonances when translating from Russian?!" I am convinced that a translation can only be made according to the principle of 'technical ascent' – that is, a translator can and must complicate the rhythmical patterns of the original, if necessary, but he does not ever have the right to simplify it! A catchy tune can and must be turned into a symphony, if necessary, yet the symphony cannot be turned into a pop song.

The most terrible thing is a former slave's boorish freedom: when a translator does not take the original into consideration, but writes, substantially, what he wants.

I think a good translation produces a good poem in the target language. Poetry's meaning not only lies in words, but also in the magical tissue created by these words when put in a

certain order. If there is no magic, no music attracting the reader, there is no translation either. In addition, a translator of poetry has to be extremely skilled in the arsenal of all poetic devices; he must be an excellent craftsman. In his own poetry, he may not use half of these devices, but all poetic skills are vital for the translation. Rhyme, inner rhyme, rhythms, alliteration and assonance – you should have all of the tools at your disposal, and that is why I don't believe a non-poet can translate poetry.

I think a professional man of letters must be able to cope with whatever task he undertakes. As a professional person, I wouldn't undertake the translating of a poet if I didn't already feel inside a ready-made embryo of his works.

Thirty years ago, I started translating poems by the prominent Estonian poet Juhan Viiding. He managed to approve of the first translations, to analyse them, and to advise on them. We were going to make a collection of reciprocal translations. Not only was Juhan Viiding a major poet, he was also a famous actor. He shared Hamlet's fate, embodied that fate on stage, and voluntarily ended his life before he even turned fifty. We were friends since childhood. Juhan used to say his poems – an actor's poems – were to some extent feminine, so I would be able to translate them (whereas my poems, as he said, were strictly masculine, so he could convey them in Estonian). Our plans didn't come to fruition, and I have postponed my work for many years. Several years ago, I felt it was my duty to offer Juhan Viiding as part of the heritage TO Russian readers. I had long years of poetic experience behind me. In 2011 both my Viiding translation, *A Night Song for a Male Voice*, and my selected poetry collection *See You In Paradise* appeared.

Now I am writing a script from Viiding's poems which I want to stage in two languages. Every poem will be recited both in Estonian and in Russian, showing the similarities and differences. Surely, the Russian Viiding is more rhythmical than the Estonian one; the Estonian one is stricter, more reserved and more manly than the Russian one. The image systems

diverge in some things like two branches of a river. Yet, I hope everyone will feel that they see different incarnations, different moods, different realizations of the same poet who changed Estonian poetry and who still hasn't appeared in Russian poetry.

In recent years, I have translated nineteen other Estonian poets. And I have reached the conclusion that the more difficult the poet is, the EASIER it is to translate him. All difficulties can always be clarified. But if a poet is simple, MYSTERIOUSLY simple, then it is almost impossible to translate him, as the texture of his poetry is very hard to capture, even with an experienced poetic eye. Thus it is easier for me to translate the difficult Jan Kaus, Juku-Kalle Raid and Ott Arder, than the simple Doris Kareva or Jaan Kaplinski.

A peculiarity of Estonian poetry that is very dear and natural to me is the philosophical equality of all things living and inanimate. In Estonian poetry, a bird, a flower, a tree, a stone, glass or a squirrel is no less significant than a person; they all give birth to love, and tragedy, and care, and aversion. I think the same things are important for my own poems as well.

In these notes, I haven't touched upon one of the most significant questions. Talent and vocation are necessary for translation: they provide all that is necessary to solve all tasks. No one can judge his own talent (while sitting at a desk all of us – both scribblers and geniuses – think ourselves to be great creators, but no sooner do we leave the desk than the majority of us become bitterly disappointed).

While translating, I keep thinking: we speak different languages but we say the same things. To convey this similarity through differences is a task for the flexible aspects of language that can eventually dance any dance at all.

A lot of aphorisms have been created about translation. I like this one: a translation is like a woman – if she is beautiful, she is unfaithful, and if she is faithful, she is ugly. I support both faithfulness and beauty. The rest is for the reader to decide.



## Yelena Skulskaya

**A poet, prose writer, playwright and translator. Author of fourteen books published both in Estonia and in Russia. Among them are: *Counting Into Pain* (1991), *Poems on the Death of a Ficus* (1996), *Eve on a Pole* (2005), *Love and Other Love Stories* (2008) and *Until* (2010). Skulskaya has translated Juhan Viiding's collection of poems *A Night Song for a Male Voice* (2011). Two books of essays by Yelena Skulskaya have been translated into Estonian: *Russian Roulette* and *Forty Degrees* (the Estonian translation under the title *Hedgehogs in the Fog*). Skulskaya's latest collection of poems *See You in Paradise* (2011) contains both her original poems and translations of 19 Estonian poets.**

**Her plays have been staged in Tallinn at the Russian Theatre (*How to Love an Empress?* (2005), *Icy Rose* (2008), etc.), and as part of the Dovlatov Days in Tallinn (*Reading Dovlatov* 2011). She has won the annual award of the Cultural Endowment, the international award *Russkaya Premiya*, the *Good Message* award, etc. She is the hostess of the *Batareja* programme on Estonian TV, dedicated to the mutual influence of Estonian and Russian cultures.**

*Translated from Russian by Roman Fokin*

# Arved

## a Fighter Without

b y A r n e M e r i l a i

Arved Viirlaid was born on 11 April 1922 in Padise Parish, Harju County, the son of a farmer. He studied at the Kloostri primary school in 1930–36 and at the Tallinn State College of Applied Arts in 1937–41. When war broke out, he evaded the Soviet army recruiters and joined the guerrillas called the Forest Brothers, and volunteer battalions. During the German regime, he worked at a publishing house and, later in exile, was involved in the printing business. In 1943, in order to avoid Wehrmacht mobilisation, he fled to Finland and joined the Estonian volunteer regiment that fought in the Continuation War between Finland and the Soviet Union. In August 1944 he returned home to fight the ‘liberators’ arriving from the east. After Estonia was occupied, he escaped to Sweden in September 1945. Together with a group of Baltic soldiers, he was soon secretly transferred to England, to be trained for intelligence work in Soviet Estonia. The operation was cancelled, probably because of the uncovering of the super-spy Kim Philby, which revealed the naivety of the British secret service. Viirlaid, interned and relying on occasional jobs,

decided to devote himself to creative work: a writer was thus born, utterly faithful to free Estonia and refusing all compromises in the defence of his nation. He quickly became known amongst his escaped compatriots. In 1953 Viirlaid travelled to Canada. He was the long-time chairman of the Estonian PEN Club and worked from 1954 in Toronto and its surroundings, where the Estonian community was vital. In 1997, President Lennart Meri awarded him the Order of the National Coat of Arms, but Viirlaid refused the honour as he was not satisfied with the manner in which the new republic was being run, which he called ‘digging a grave for the Estonian people’.

Arved Viirlaid is a tough idealistic fighter, who defies unjust Fate and never complains, as is the case with most of his largely prototypical heroes. His first attempts at prose and poetry were published before the war in Estonia. His debut book was the collection of poetry *Hulkuri evangeelium* (Vagrant’s Gospel), followed soon by *Üks suveõhtune naeratus* (A Summer Evening Smile). These clearly reveal the post-traumatic bipolarity that characterised all of

# Viirlaid

## Compromise

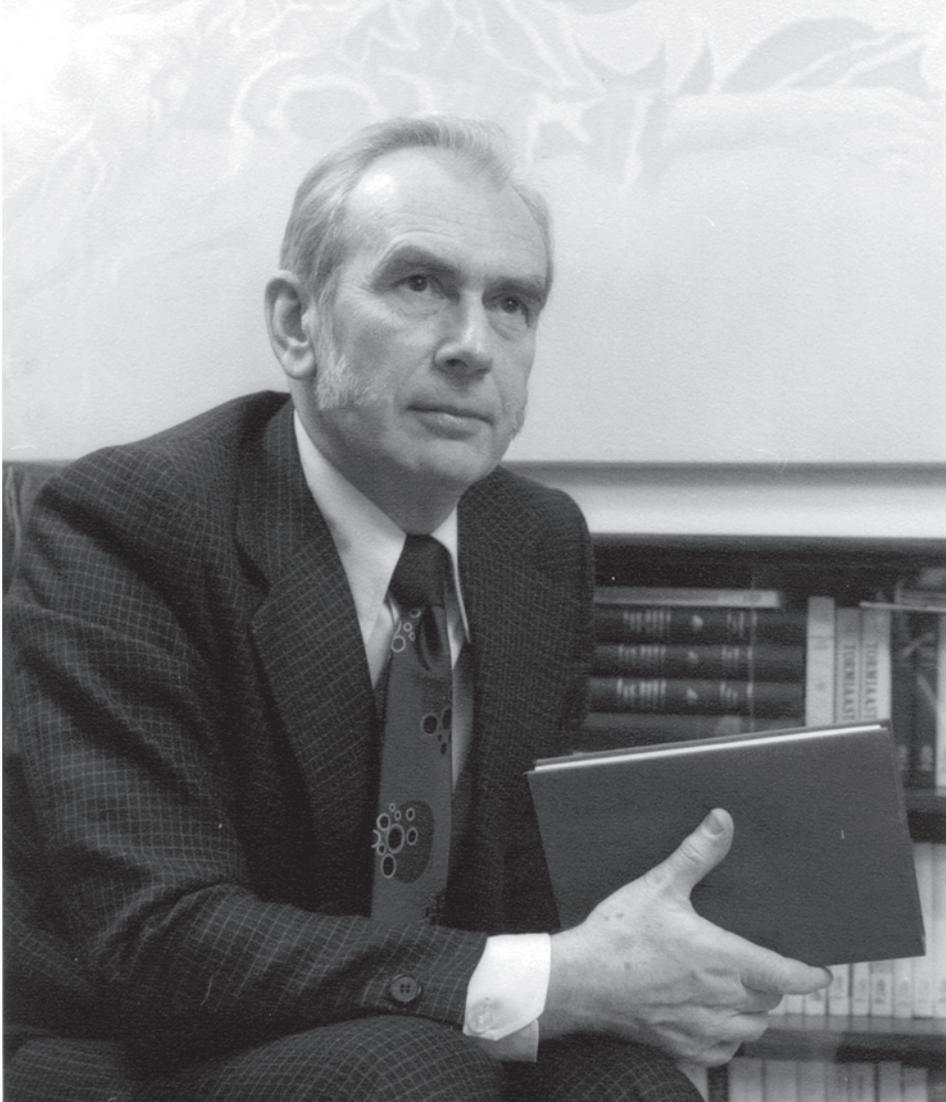
13

exile literature: conflicting expressions of euphoric fighting energy and lyrical moods of tenderness or depression. The poet denounces the occupiers who perpetrated the genocide and declares their inevitable demise. Although it took four decades, full of active work, until victory, he finally managed to witness it.

The opening poem *Minu elulugu* (Autobiography) declares the symbolic initiation of a poetic hero (Viirlaid 2001: 38): *In the morning / under frightened aspens / I met a black bear / head-on. / In his embrace / I became a man.* The nostalgic *Vana tuulik* (An Old Windmill) formulates the exile mood of long years of anxiety: *I came to Foreign Land without my people, / I came, lofty and tender and able to die. / – Till the pain will once explode / in flames, old windmill back home / grinds the sand of grave.* The poet perceives that the imprisoned homeland has delegated its voice to those who managed to escape to the West, also shown in the moral assuredness in his subsequent novels (Viirlaid 2000: 63): *But the roar is also there: / the scorn between staves / of Estonians in Siberian taigas. // The singing prisoners sing louder, // and you, the free, / hear an unbroken song / of prisoners singing* (Vangid laulavad / The Prisoners are Singing).

Although his work has mainly focused on bulky novels, five collections of poetry have appeared gradually, occasionally in a lyrical-epical, alternately in a fragmentary or linguistically playful, manner: *Jäätanud peegel* (Frosted Mirror, Lund 1962), *Hõllalaulud* (Songs of Longing), *Käsikäes* (Hand in Hand), *Igaviku silmapilgutus* (A Blink of Eternity), and *Valgus rahnude all* (Light under the Reefs). He condemns the Soviet crimes and the Western betrayal, but often harshly speaks out against the exile mentality that has gradually alienated Estonians from their homeland and their mother tongue, which has become increasingly petrified and conforming. Viirlaid's *Selected Poems*, translated by Taimi Ene Moks and the American poet R. W. Stedingham, was published in 2001 in Vancouver. Stedingham provides a lengthy introduction as well.

However, Viirlaid became famous primarily for his active resistance epic, which describes the selfless struggle of Estonians against the communist conquest during and after World War II. The core problem of the foremost novelist at home, Jaan Kross, was the art of inevitable compromise, whereas the privileges of his contemporary Viirlaid working in the free world have included ideological demands and unshakeable



Arved Viirald 1983

principles, which nevertheless do not exclude human empathy. At home, the censors naturally banned the works of such a dangerous enemy, vilifying his name, so that the first publication of his work in Estonia appeared only at the beginning of the independence period.

The two-part first novel *Tormiaastad* (Years of Storms) shows the troubled and confusing situation in Estonia when the Soviet army was approaching. Idealistically heroic, but painfully tragic and hopeless, catastrophic events continued in the next two-volume book *Ristideta hauad* (Graves without Crosses). This is the best known of his works, and has been translated into Latvian, Swedish, French, Finnish, Spanish,

English, Chinese and Lithuanian.

Similar to another great exile writer, Karl Ristikivi, and the existential-unreal flow of consciousness in his novel *Hingede öö* (All Souls' Night), is Viirald's confessional work *Seitse kohtupäeva* – (Seven Days of Judgement). This book describes the search of a tormented soul and the sense of guilt of an exile writer, former soldier and freedom fighter, ill and rejected, residing in London.

The main topic and character creation in *Ristideta hauad* is depicted in a powerful pentalogy. Supplemented by numerous subplots, it focuses on the life of the unwavering officer Eerik Horm, whose epic-ethical, Achilles-Odysseus-like qualities help him in his struggle against the destroyers of

Estonia. The pentalogy contains the following novels: *Vaim ja ahelad* (Spirit and Shackles), *Kustuvad tuled* (The Fading Lights), *Sadu jõkke* (Rain for the River), *Kes tappis Eerik Horni?* (Who Killed Eerik Horn?) and *Surnud ei loe* (The Dead Don't Matter). The plot alternates between past and present, the external and intuition, and occasionally seems incredibly fictional in its description of an intense and wealthy flow of events: bloody battles and the brave but brutal Forest Brothers; sadistic torture and death in prisons and slave camps; terror and murders; destroying women and children; poisoned human relations and lost love; several lucky or unlucky prison breaks; a superhuman tolerance of pain and hunger; the routine testing of the characters' physical and mental health; dozens of miraculous escapes from death and unexpected endings of life; total fidelity or revolting betrayal; and an exceptional arrival behind the Iron Curtain, which paradoxically turns out to be the final dead end, both politically and psychologically.

Only Ene Mihkelson's great novels *Ahasveeruse uni* (The Sleep of Ahasuerus, 2001) and *Katkuhaud* (Plague Grave, 2007) have succeeded in conveying the post-war guerrilla fighting and its implications as convincingly and in such detail. In the last two books mentioned, Viirlaid manages to 'revive' the previous co-fighters, two men and a woman, who were certainly destroyed. He transfers their clones to Canada, where they lead a cosy life, probably hinting at the effective simulation of the 'almighty' Soviet secret service, which evokes paranoid psychosis. Eerik Horn, always defying death, cannot break out of that devious cobweb alive. Still, behind the hypertrophy and unbelievable 'adventures', there is a strongly biographical compilation – real life stories of real prototypes. One of the most important informants was the husband of the writer's sister-in-law, Eerik Heine, whose disturbingly honest name was destroyed in a strange KGB and CIA joint conspiracy, assisted by idiotic exile intrigues. The personal experiences and facts are totally

reliable, resembling those of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. (As we know, before he became a fulminating Russian chauvinist, he regarded Estonian political prisoners very highly; after all, he wrote his *Gulag Archipelago* in Estonia, hiding with his moral role model and friend Arnold Susi and his family.)

Viirlaid's next to last novel, *Märgitud* (Marked), describes a shameful post-war incident: the Estonian volunteers who stayed in neighbouring Finland were imprisoned and extradited to the Soviet Union by the Finnish pro-communist government and security police. Viirlaid's astute short stories are represented by the collection *Saatuse sõlmed* (Knots of Fate), which offers 'stories from the era of radical changes', including those that take a critical view of the initial years of the newly independent homeland.

Viirlaid's longer stories, which occasionally seem more like short novels, are gathered into the bulky volume *Ajal on mitu nägu* (Time Has Many Faces, 2005), which has been published in Estonia. The Dickensian realism of the later Viirlaid is captivating, lucid, sensitive and peaceful: the author surprises the reader with totally new topics, once again revealing his lyrical heart. Two tales are biographical: the story about the top sportsman and successful forestry industrialist Nikolai Küttis, *Mees, kes raius kuldseid laaste* (A Man Who Chopped Golden Chips), and the story *Sillaehitaja* (The Bridge Builder), dedicated to the life of the Estonian–Latvian culture mediator Leonard Svarcs. With equal humour, he depicts his great friend in his retirement years, a barn-cat (*Kiisu-Liisu nurrukott*, Kitty Catty Purr-Bag). Thrilling fictional stories tackle the initial turbulent years of the first independence period and later years: *Kai, Paadu ja poisid* (Kai, Paadu and the Boys) and especially the title story *Ajal on mitu nägu*. The book ends with a nostalgic memory portrait of his childhood farmhouse, with the hopeful title *Õunapuu peab õitsema* (The Apple Tree Must Bloom).

Arved Viirlaid's latest book is the memoir-novel *Põhjatähe pojad* (Sons of the Northern Star), which quickly sold out and was reprinted.

# A Tragedy on a Minor Stage of Europe's History:

# Arved Viirlaid's Story of the 'Finnish Boys'

b y J ü r i T a l v e t

In an article in *Eesti Päevaleht* (30 April 2009), Janika Kronberg highlights three Estonian exile writers who particularly enriched Estonian literature after WWII. These are, in Kronberg's opinion, Kalju Lepik, Karl Ristikivi and Arved Viirlaid.

For my part, I have little doubt that, among the living Estonian writers abroad, Arved Viirlaid deserves more merit than any other. In the wake of the postmodern turn in cultural philosophy, a change of paradigm in literature is apparently in the air. I believe Viirlaid would have resisted this change better than quite a few of those writers whom we have traditionally considered to be the worthiest exponents of our contemporary literary canon.

Perhaps the postmodern paradigm itself has become exhausted. The young Estonian peripheral culture has always moved in the after-wave of the mainstream originated in the West. The wish that modernism could become inbred in our literature or that, in the light of

postmodern theory, outstanding literary works would crop up in Estonia, one after another, lacks any foundation. What can be said about the present-day Estonian literature is probably valid of a much broader area of the literary periphery. For instance, Orhan Pamuk, the 2006 Nobel Prize winner, in his key novel *Snow*, employs explicative chapter titles as consciously introduced retro-elements which were widely used in the European novel until the middle of the 19th century. The chapter titles in Viirlaid's book *Põhjatähe pojad* (*Sons of the Northern Star*) resemble those of Pamuk: "Rising to a yuppie god", "Back to Estonia!" etc. No reader would suspect that they hide any astute narrative tactics. The result is the same in both cases: Pamuk and Viirlaid are writers whose main aim is to reflect certain dramatic moments in the historical fate of their respective homelands. It would make little sense to try to establish on these grounds dividing lines between postmodernism and realism. They can be quite close, forming an essential blend.

For that reason, I like the peaceful-realistic narrative manner in which Arved Viirlaid reproduces one of the most crucial episodes of his own life-story, his participation with more than three thousand Estonian 'Finnish boys' (in Estonian: soomepoisid) in the heroic resistance war against the Soviet-Russian invaders of our ethnic kin-nation, the Finns. *Põhjatähe pojad* is an autobiography in the form of a novel, in which the narrator Arved Viirlaid, however, does not attempt to make a stand for his personal story, but rather depicts one of the harshest trials of his nation, Estonia, in its modern history. He is not a chronicler who acts (either in reality or in his thoughts) within the circle of leaders and power to try to provide a wider overview of the whole war theatre: 'extra-history', so to speak. (This tends to be the case in Jaan Kross' historical prose. The difference can clearly be seen if one compares Viirlaid's book with Kross' novel *Treading Air* (English translation, 2003, by Eric Dickens; in Estonian: Paigallend, 1998).)

Viirlaid is a common soldier who transmits a more hidden history, events that are not generally included in encyclopaedias, historical overviews or textbooks. Even the most thorough historians would be incapable of gathering such material in their panoramic narratives. Irja, a Finnish high-school girl with whom Arved falls in love, appears to be a relative of the Finnish prime minister, thus belonging to a social class into which, as the narrator Viirlaid admits, "I hardly put my foot". Arved's own life is not in danger in the frontline of battles (where, similarly to many other Finnish Boys, he never found himself), but instead is menaced after a dance party on the outskirts of Käkisalme, a small town ruined by war, where a Finnish kindred brother, in a moment of jealousy, is about to stab Arved with a dagger.

At the same time, Viirlaid does not allow the work to become a simple adventure novel. An example of the latter is provided

by Ilmar Talve's book *Juhansonid reisid* (Travels of Juhanson; Lund, 1959, reprint 2009), in which the departure point is similarly the war adventure of our Estonian Finnish Boys. The conversations between characters in Viirlaid's book are mostly the fruit of the author's fancy, but the characters themselves are all historical figures. Viirlaid's book even presents an index of the names of persons involved. In addition, the work includes an abundance of factual material. The diaspora of the Finnish Boys' destiny is characterized by intertwined excerpts from *Soomepoiste lühilulood* (Brief Biographies of Finnish Boys; Tallinn, 1997). The more serious plan of the battleground, in which death makes its presence – something that Talve's humorous novel inevitably, as conditioned by the chosen genre itself, had to avoid – is conveyed in Viirlaid's book by letters received by the author from his war companion Hans Lebert.

Miguel de Unamuno called this 'intra-history': it is the daily search for love, the desire to survive, the cry of pain and anguish of simple people in the desert of existence.

'Below' – as in Viirlaid's narrative – a nation and its freedom cannot be identical to reason's construction, close to power. They rather represent a feeling, a choice close to one's soul. It is more vague than an idea (let alone an *idée fixe*), but it is more honest, more open to different responses. Love, and love for one's homeland, cannot be manipulated by reason's commandments. However, once love has settled in a person – as was overwhelmingly the case of the Finnish Boys, Arved included – it is something deeper than a rationally orientated patriotism (which unfortunately is more often than not only projected from 'above' by male-power, but is also manipulated in the interest of men).

In his thorough article, Janika Kronberg makes an attempt to characterize the 'betrayed generation' and to judge who was more betrayed, the Finnish Boys or those who as recruits had to join either the

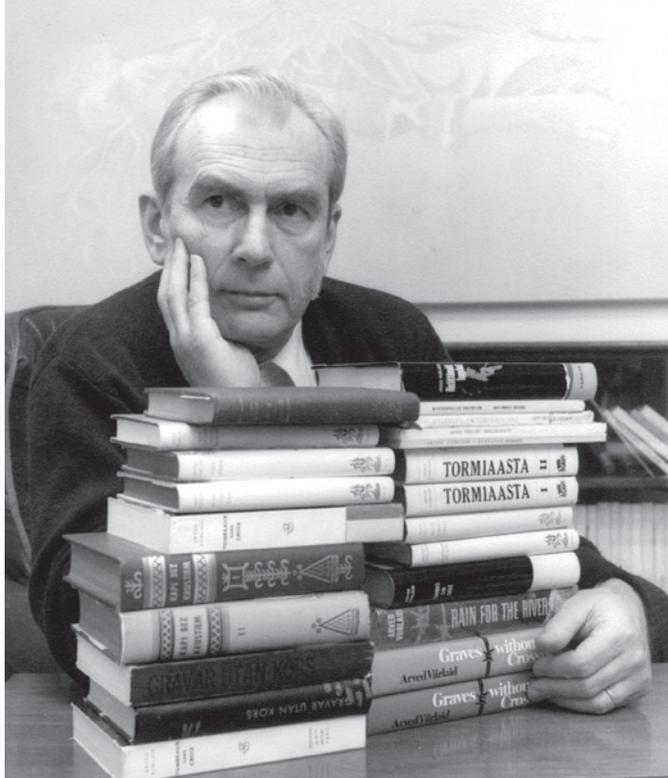


German or the Soviet-Russian army. He believes that the Finnish Boys were less betrayed than those other young men.

In my opinion, it makes little sense to discuss betrayals and cheating in the historical circumstances dominated by war schemes. These were invented by men of power. They did not leave simple young men any choice. The entire epoch was full of horrid betrayals and loathsome crimes. To discuss the item would be the same as to try to weigh on a milligram-scale which of two totalitarianisms, Hitlerism or Stalinism, was more criminal. Neither can one suppose that all young Estonian men in this limited situation acted alike. In his book, Viirlaid reflects their hesitations, here and there alluding to the possible background factors of their particular choices. However, in his investigation he does not go into as much depth as, for instance, Ene Mihkelson in her novel *Katkuhaud* (The Plague Grave, 2007). Few managed to survive that trial without deeper wounds. Most of those who returned to Estonia were imprisoned by Russians or were lucky enough to save their lives by fleeing to Sweden (Viirlaid himself was among the latter). A smaller number died in the retreat of the German army and some as 'forest brothers' (metsavennad, as partisans were called in Estonia).

What do we know about the 'other'? The main spiritual urge of the West since the Modern Age and the birth of its nations has been to establish and fortify its 'self'. World War II was an abominable, bloody crime, which nobody escaped with clean hands. The main concern was to save oneself. The West could hardly have managed to defeat Hitler's Germany without Russia. Something had to be left, as a trophy and compensation, to Russia as an ally, a winner and a country that had suffered terrible losses. What could Finland do? Finns could appreciate Estonians, but as Viirlaid hints in his book, they could hardly have had full trust in the aid coming from the south, the theatre of the cruel games between Hitler and Stalin. Besides, Finland itself was far from being free in its decisions. Young Estonian men could flee to Finland from their home country occupied by the Germans, to wage a more honest war along with their kindred brothers. Yet Finland was not in that war on the side of the allies. Returning Estonians to their homeland was arranged in accordance with Finland's agreements with Germany. The fact that the Germans, who by that time were losing ground, did not follow these agreements was a trifling case of cheating in war circumstances.

Likewise it would make little sense to discuss who loved the Estonian fatherland more, those who went into hiding in forests, those who participated in the creation of Soviet Estonia or those who sent their sighs of yearning from exile to their homeland. It was a time of harsh choices without any freedom of choice. What really matters is to what extent one was free in himself or herself and how much one loved in his/her soul and heart. No oaths of fidelity or wearing on one's breast badges of patriotism can measure value. This love lies deeper, and is invisible.



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Ristideta hauad I, II (*Graves without Crosses I, II*), Eesti Kirjanike Kooperatiiv AB, Lund, Sweden 1952 (368 & 360)

Seitse kohtupäeva (*Seven Days of Judgment*), Eesti Kirjanike Kooperatiiv AB, Lund, Sweden 1957 (347)

Vaim ja ahelad (*Spirit and Shackles*), Eesti Kirjanike Kooperatiiv AB, Lund, Sweden 1961 (343)

Kustuvad tuled (*Fading Lights*), Eesti Kirjanike Kooperatiiv AB, Lund, Sweden 1965 (274)

Sadu jõkke (*Rainfall into the River*), Eesti Kirjanike Kooperatiiv AB, Lund, Sweden 1965 (260)

Kes tappis Eerik Hormi? (*Who Killed Eerik Horm?*), Eesti Kirjanike Kooperatiiv AB, Lund, Sweden 1974 (285)

Surnud ei loe (*The Dead Don't Count*), Eesti Kirjanike Kooperatiiv AB, Lund, Sweden 1975 (276)

Märgitud (*Before the Cock Crows*), Eesti Kirjanike Kooperatiiv AB, Lund, Sweden 1980 (220)

Märgitud (*Before the Cock Crows*), second edition, "Periodika", Tallinn, Estonia 1990 (224)

Ristideta hauad I, II (*Graves without Crosses I, II*), second edition, "Periodika", Tallinn, Estonia 1991 (240 & 240)

Vaim ja ahelad (*Spirit and Shackles*), second edition, AS "Virgela", Tallinn, Estonia 1998 (326)

Mees, kes raius kuldseid laaste (*Biography of Nikolai Küttsi*), "Meie Elu", Toronto, Canada 1999 (62)

Põhjatähe pojad (*Sons of the Northern Star*), "Ilmamaa", Tartu, Estonia, 2009 (463)

Ristideta hauad (*Graves without Crosses*), 3rd edition, "Eesti Päevaleht/Academia", Tallinn, 2009 (524)

Kolm tilka verd (*Three Drops of Blood*), manuscript being finalized, (576)

Põhjatähe pojad (*Sons of the Northern Star*), 2nd edition, "Ilmamaa", Tartu, Estonia, 2010 (463)

## Collection of Short Stories

Saatuse sõlmed (*Knots of Fate*), Eesti Kirjanike Kooperatiiv AB, Lund, Sweden 1993 (248)

Saatuse sõlmed (*Knots of Fate*), second edition, "Eesti Raamat", Tallinn, Estonia 1994 (168)

Ajal on mitu nägu (*Time has many Faces*), "Ilmamaa", Tartu, Estonia 2005 (463)

## Poetry

Hulkuri evangeelium (*A Vagabond's Gospel*), published by the author, London, England 1948 (96)

Üks suveõhtune naeratus (*A Summer Night's Smile*), published by the author, London, England 1949 (96)

Jäätanud peegel (*Frosted Mirror*), Eesti Kirjanike Kooperatiiv AB, Lund, Sweden 1962 (96)

Hõllalaulud (*Songs of Longing*), Eesti Kirjanike Kooperatiiv AB, Lund, Sweden 1967 (96)

Käsi käes (*Hand in Hand*), Eesti Kirjanike Kooperatiiv AB, Lund, Sweden 1978 (96)

Igaviku silmapilgutus (*Wink of Eternity*), Eesti Kirjanike Kooperatiiv AB, Lund, Sweden 1982 (112)

Valgus rahnude all (*Light under the Rocks*), Eesti Kirjanike Kooperatiiv AB, Lund, Sweden 1990 (96)

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Kapi bez krustiem I, II (*Ristideta hauad I, II* in Latvian), Tīlta Apgāds, Minneapolis, U.S.A. 1956 (448 & 448)

Gravar utan kors (*Ristideta hauad* in Swedish), Antromeda Förlag, Stockholm, Sweden 1959 (478)

Tombeaux sans croix (*Ristideta hauad* in French), Éditions Albin Michel, Paris, France 1962 (444)

Tumbas sin cruz (*Ristideta hauad* in Spanish), Luis de Caralt, Barcelona, Spain 1966 (412)

Ristittömät haudat (*Ristideta hauad* in Finnish), Arvi A. Karisto OY, Hämeenlinna, Finland. 1st edition 1968 (469), 2 printings. 2nd edition 1977 (412), 2 printings. Book-club selection.

Graves without Crosses (in English), Clarke Irwin & Co. Ltd., Toronto 1972 (428), 2 editions.

Bey cho mai de i dai (*Ristideta hauad* in Chinese), Li Ming Cultural Enterprise Co. Ltd., Taipei, Taiwan, ROC, 1981 (356)

Kapai be kryziu (*Ristideta hauad* in Lithuanian), Leidykla "Sviesa", Kaunas, Lithuania 1996 (568)

Rain for the River (in English), Tafelberg-Uitgewers, Cape Town, South Africa, 1964 (302)

Henki ja kahleet (*Vaim ja ahelad* in Finnish), Arvi A. Karisto OY, Hämeenlinna, Finland 1981 (422), 2 printings. Book-club selection.

Mezos vāļi brīvība elpo (*Kustuvad tuled / Sadu jökke* in Latvian), Laiks Publishers, New York, 1983 (435)

Apzimogotie (*Mārgitud* in Latvian), Preses Nams, Rīga, Latvia 1999 (288)

Mezos vāļi brīvība elpo (*Kustuvad tuled / Sadu jökke* in Latvian), 2nd ed., Sia Raudava, Rīga, Latvia 2001 (392)

Selected Poems (in English by T.E. Moks and R.W. Stedingh), Lyre Press, Vancouver, Canada 2001 (194) Ristideta hauad (*Graves without Crosses* in Russian), Vene Entsüklopeedia Publishers, Tallinn, Estonia 2005 (576)

Pohjantähdien pojat (*Põhjatähe pojad* in Finnish), Ajatus Kirjat, Finland 2010 (448)

Merkityt (*Mārgitud* in Finnish), LampLiteLtd, Finland 2010 (303)

# Prima Vista

the people's word festival of Tartu

b y B e r k V a h e r

The Prima Vista literary festival of Tartu was initiated in 2004 as one of the new ventures within the framework of a larger agenda for enriching the city's cultural life with major international events. The then vice mayor for culture and education, Laine Jänes, also became the festival's godmother – obviously inspired by her background in choir conducting. The name Prima Vista, meaning „to read or perform something without preparation or prior acquaintance“, was very apt indeed – even though the Tartu University library book fair Utlib Market served as the launchpad for the festival, and Estonian Literary Society as well as the Tartu branch of Estonian Writers Union had been organising numerous local events, none of the parties involved in planning the first Prima Vista had any substantial experience in large-scale festival management. The result, however, eventually deserved the city award for the best cultural event of the year. Still primarily city-funded, Prima Vista has been marked as one of the Festivals of Distinction for Tartu.

Today, nearing its ninth coming, Prima Vista has expanded from its initial two days into a week-long programme with pre- and post-

events, vying for the status of one of the largest literary festivals in the Baltic area with its vibrant presence in the cityscape, exciting roster of international as well as local performers, and also increasingly multi-ethnic audiences. The management side of the festival has come a long way from „reading without preparation“, operating on the year-round basis now as the network for key literary institutions of Tartu. The meaning of the festival name has retained its freshness and applicability in a few other important ways, though. There is a new key theme each year; there is also the First Step award for the best literary debut in periodicals. And most of all – essentially, Prima Vista is a people's festival, open to passers-by, welcoming inquisitive minds from beyond the literati lounge. In other words, we expect every festival to provide a first for someone – first encounter with literature (also by our children's programme), with a certain author or literary work.

That also presumes some adventurous thinking in „invading“ the urban space. Although the university library is the main hub of the festival – attracting hoards of students who seek diversion from preparing for their countless exams – some of the most distinctive

activities of Prima Vista have always preferred outdoor venues. The book fair sets up dozens of stalls for curious browsers in search of volumes old and new; the Tartu Public Library moves its borrowing outlets to the central park of the town and enlivens it with its own programme which includes the Singing Writers show and the night cinema. After all, Tartu is exceptionally well equipped with pedestrian walks and green areas where one can indulge in reading, and festival has made a fair use of those premises.

Even though we emphasise the intimate links of Prima Vista with the literary past, present and future of Tartu, we also make it clear that it is a national as well as international event. Since 2006, we have taken the closing programme of the festival to another Estonian town; the partner cities so far have included Narva, Võru, Pärnu, Viljandi, Põltsamaa, Tallinn; and it's Elva for this year. Also, from the beginning, our festival has had an annual patron from among our literary figures, who gets some say in the programme and some added focus on his/her works. The patrons of Prima Vista have been Rein Veidemann (2004, 2005), Indrek Hirv (2006), Arvo Valton (2007), Doris Kareva (2008), Andres Ehin (2009), Hannes Varblane (2010), Rein Raud (2011) and Mihkel Mutt (2012).

Yet, it is always the guest performers who guarantee some proper attention from the national media. With few major publishing houses boasting extensive international rights and contacts, Tartu has built its „abroad acts“ roster largely on the extended understanding of the artistic use of the word, rather than merely focusing the programme on the launch of translated publications of fiction and poetry. Thus, among the successes of Prima Vista there have been renowned performance poets such as Benjamin Zephaniah and John Cooper Clarke (and hopefully the audience interest is repeated this year with German subversive troubadour Wolf Biermann as well as French Symbolist rockers Varsovie); as well as inventive and poetic music critics from The Wire Magazine. Of course, often the university ties help along in getting authors with academic

proclivities – notably the great Umberto Eco, our guest of honour at the 2009 festival.

A crucial element in Prima Vista's growth, however, has been the meticulous attention on providing events for the Russian audience and everyone interested in Russian literature – our festival is one of the very few in Estonia to consider it a major cultural mission. Our main performers in that line of activities are known for their social criticism: Lyudmila Ulitskaja, Alexandra Marinina, Dmitry Bykov, Dina Rubina, as well as Evgeniy Grishkovets and Grigory Oster who attend Prima Vista this spring.

In addition, Prima Vista has hosted performers from Germany, Spain, Hungary, Romania, Poland, Finland, Latvia, Lithuania, etc – and it is always particularly enjoyable when the guests stay on to mingle with the audience. The Wire Magazine authors DJing at a rave in the old Yeast Factory; Benjamin Zephaniah teaching some martial arts to a young painter in the wake of the popular Conference of Happiness; John Cooper Clarke jamming with the local legend Grisha Lotman or cracking jokes with a group of models on Rüütli street way past midnight are among my own most memorable moments of our festivals!

We have, however, also presented intriguing artistic challenges for writers of our own. In 2009 and 2010, we published the „Men Don't Cry“ compilations born of the writers' residences in remote Estonian villages; for this year, award-winning author and critic Sven Vabar is curating the „Non-Tartu“ volume put together from various authors' experiences at the „non-touristic“, marginal, strange sites in Tartu, with further walking tours planned for the launch of the book at the festival. This relates perfectly to our theme for the year, „ruumID/roomID“ – the ways how places and spaces shape our identities and vice versa, how the written and spoken word enters into and emerges from those processes.

Much more could be said about the festival which each year merges together music, film, fashion, theatre, and other arts, still all around the word. But then, everyone is welcome to see and hear for themselves – this year, from 7 to 13 of May.

Prima Vista 2011. Photos by Andres Apevalov,  
Andres Ehrenpreis, Uku Peterson





# Tallinn Literature Festival

# HeadRead

b y K r i s t a K a e r

F e s t i v a l D i r e c t o r

**I remember my first impressions of literary festivals in Great Britain, and I must say that these were so strong that I just wanted to grab all the books that their authors spoke about and read them immediately. I also saw the queues of people who all wanted to go and listen to one writer or another. So when someone came out with the idea to organize a big international literature festival in Tallinn, I gladly joined the team.**

Now I can say that in the spring of 2012, the Tallinn Literature Festival HeadRead (meaning: good lines) takes place for the fourth time. It is loosely based on two previous festivals, called The Festival of Nordic Poetry and Socia. Socia means more avant-garde poetry, often combined with music. To these two we have added contemporary prose and Nordic poetry has become world poetry. In the first two years we attempted to imitate all the festivals that take place in festival tents and mostly outdoors but our climate proved to be far too

unreliable, so now our main venues are all indoors, decorated and rearranged for the occasion.

In 2012 the festival takes place on May 3–June 3. In addition to the main venue in the building of the Estonian Writers' Union some of the readings and talks and events take place at the Estonian Centre of Children's Literature, at the Central Library in Tallinn, Estonian National Drama Theatre, and at a jazz club. The idea of the festival is to bring together Estonian writers and their colleagues from other countries and also introduce new authors to the

# read

Estonian audience. The number of Estonian readers is not big, our print runs are small and that means that the agents and foreign publishers are not too interested in sending the authors to the promotion trips of their books. Likewise, Estonian publishers are struggling even to publish any translated literary fiction, so they cannot afford to invite well-known authors to meet their Estonian audience. The festival is thus in a way the only possibility for Estonian readers to meet foreign authors and to listen to them explaining the background of their work and revealing the thoughts and minds of other cultures.

This year we will see in Tallinn such authors as David Mitchell, Natasha Cooper, Jason Goodwin, Zinovy Zinik (Great Britain), Arthur Japin (Holland), Thomas Glavinic (Austria), Ludmila Petrushevskaya (Russia), Tuomas Kyro and Siri Kolu (Finland), Lars Svendsen and Ketil Bjornstad (Norway), Rawi Hage and Madeleine Thien (Canada) and Paule Constant (France).

There are also poetry performances which include both Estonian and Finnish poets, discussions (e.g. *Why do we write about history, and not about the present day*, and *Is there a future for Estonian culture and literature?*) and the first reading of a play by Andrus Kivirähk, probably the most popular contemporary

Estonian author. Each day of the festival starts with an event for children at the Centre for Children's Literature and each day ends with an event combining music and poetry.

Literary walks cover different areas of Tallinn and reveal their literary layers. One of these walks has become particularly popular – it is the walk based on crime stories by Indrek Hargla that take place in Medieval Tallinn.

This year we have also decided to ask readers to find the best descriptions of Tallinn in both Estonian and translated literature and to send the quotes to the organizing committee: [info@headread.ee](mailto:info@headread.ee)

I would like to conclude with the following thought. The popularity of literature festivals all over the world is perhaps our subconscious wish to return to the times when literature actually consisted of stories told sitting by the fire, and the storytellers and bards moved from place to place, bringing news and different stories and different ideas. When leaving, they took something with them to weave into the tales they were going to tell by some other fires, making the world a little bigger, more colourful and more interesting. So we would like to welcome all the present day storytellers and bards at our Tallinn Literature Festival, and we hope to see in the audience people who love literature.



Headread 2011. Photos by Kärt Kukkur



# ELIC

## Estonian literature two hundred, two thousand?

b y Ø y v i n d R a n g ø y

«Cannot the tongue of this land / In the wind of incantation / Rising up to the heavens / Seek for eternity?» asked Kristjan Jaak Peterson almost 200 years ago. As his life was tragically cut short, he never knew the answer to this question: the Estonian language has indeed risen in the wind of incantation and found its place among cultural languages. Every literary language has its own small but essential tribe: translators, who make works in foreign languages available to their own language environments. A good translator is a bridge, an ambassador, a mediator and often an artist and a poet, who is mostly not seen as such. Translators are the eyes for others, and do their work so well that they remain invisible. One of the representatives of this tribe, Cornelius Hasselblatt, has summarised the Estonian literature with admirable German precision: *The Estonian literature has developed from about two-thousand-year-old oral folk poetry, which was first written down in the 19th century, although real*

*fiction emerged only during the last third of the 19th century, (...) which at the turn of the century fully integrated with European literature so that one interwar prose writer [A. H. Tammsaare] and two contemporary writers [Jaan Kross and Jaan Kaplinski] were/are serious candidates for the Nobel prize in literature.*

The quotation was taken from the book *Tõlkes leitud Eesti* (Estonia – found in translation), which provides an insight into the stories of the translators of Estonian literature, and therefore describes a chapter in Estonia's cultural history that is not talked about that often. Although these translators are all united by their fascination with the Estonian language and literature, their paths to it have differed greatly. However, they are not alone. The Estonian constitution stipulates that the Republic of Estonia must preserve the Estonian language and culture, and

# 10

# years

31

part of this involves supporting the translation of literature. For the past ten years, this task has been carried out by the Estonian Literature Information Centre – ELIC. The above-mentioned book was launched during the Centre's jubilee seminar from 3 to 7 December.

One of the tasks of the ELIC is organising seminars for translators, and it is impossible to describe the special sense of belonging felt by Germans, Dutch, Finns, Mari, Norwegians and others when they meet up in Estonia and communicate completely naturally, in the wind of incantation, in Estonian.

It was a great honour to be among these people who, in the course of five days, were able to listen to diverse writers: Jaan Kaplinski, Mats Traat, Ene Mihkelson, Andrus Kivirähk, Paul-Eerik Rummo, Mari Saat, Indrek



Writer Mihkel Mutt and translator Cornelius Hasselblatt



Writer Eeva Park, Cornelius Hasselblatt and director of ELIC Ivi Liive at the launch of Estonia Found in Translation



Translator Kaisu Lahikainen and writer Ene Mihkelson



Translators Peeter Puide and Øyvind Rangøy, poet Viuu Härm and translator Guntars Godin



Translator Enel Melberg and writer Andrus Kivirähk

Hargla, Mihkel Mutt, Andrei Hvostov and many others. Even better – we could also talk to them. The excellent programme included a poetry evening, and a visit to a farm and a theatre, and the ELIC organisers, Ilvi Liive and Kerti Tergem, once again proved their worth and convinced everyone that the Republic of Estonia takes its constitutional duty of looking after translators seriously. On the penultimate day of the jubilee events, an exhibition, entitled Estonian Literature in Translation 2001-2011, opened. Amongst other things, visitors learned that in 2001 14 Estonian books in foreign languages appeared, whereas in 2011 the number was (at least) 44. The number probably cannot increase forever but, with the continuing support of ELIC, we all hope that our tribe of translators will not disappear or diminish, and that new ambassadors of Estonian literature will be recruited in the future.

Translators of Estonian literature (Photos by Jüri J. Dubov)





I n m e m o r i a m   A n d r e s   E h i n   1 9 4 0 - 2 0 1 1

## Lühendades küünlal tahti

Ly Seppel

Astu ikka sisse,  
liigu läbi meelest,  
hakka vahel kinni  
mõnest pillikeelest.  
Puutu ukselinki,  
kas või lõgista,  
möödamannes korraaks  
naerda mugista.  
Võta viivuks istet,  
ära mine mööda,  
istu laua taha  
siis ka, kui ei sööda.  
Astu ikka sisse,  
puhka veidi jalgu,  
pragisevas lõukas  
kohenda mõnd halgu.  
Ära nõnda möödu  
et ei tunnegi.  
Ära pelga tulla  
minu unnegi.

Siis vaid ära tule,  
kui pead koidutunnil  
hämara ja rõskel  
sööstma üles äkilise  
tuulekeeru tõstel –  
nõnda kaugele,  
et teekond peletab,  
nii hirmkõrgele,  
et silm ei seleta.  
Ära kohku, usu  
oma äranägemist,  
kui ka pole loota  
jällenägemist.  
Mina alles õpin  
unehaldja keeles,  
lühendades küünlal tahti,  
kuidas rõõmsalt tänumeeles  
lasta sinust lahti.

## Shortening the Candle's Wick

Ly Seppel

Do still come and step inside  
and move through my mind,  
pluck from time to time  
some stringed instrument.  
Touch the handle of the door,  
and even make it rattle,  
passing by for just a moment  
let me hear you chortle.  
Sit down for a little while,  
don't just keep on going,  
sit down at the table,  
even if there's no one there.  
Do still come and step inside  
and rest your feet a bit,  
in the crackling of the hearth  
shift a piece of firewood.  
Don't just pass by without me  
even noticing you.  
Don't be afraid to come by  
even into my dreams.

Stay away only if  
at the sunset hour,  
in the damp and dark  
you have to rush up high  
lifted by a sudden whirlwind –  
so very far off that  
the journey keeps you away,  
so fearfully high up  
that the eye cannot see.  
Don't be daunted, believe  
in your own understanding,  
even if there is no hope  
of ever meeting again.  
I am only now learning  
in the language of the sleep fairy,  
shortening the candle's wick,  
how in a spirit of joyful gratitude  
I can let go of you.

## Itk isale

Kristiina Ehin

Sündisid päeval, kui unesegane maa näitas end häbelikult  
märtsilume alt

Siis künti veel hobustega  
ja troskad tormasid mööda Tallinna

Veel oli esimene

Eesti Vabariik

Veel oli sinu esimene elukuu

ja keegi ei teadnud,

mis saab

Kui Saksa väed Eestile lähenesid

õppisid sa käima

Ja kui su ema 24 tundi gestaapo ülekuulamisele kinni hoiti,

õppisid vist ära,

kuidas jääda rahulikuks

Nüüd lahkusid nii äkki

Valged kardinaid jäid elutuppa rippu

männid tilkuma detsembriõist vihma

Toolid, mille polstrivahetuse pärast me korraks tülitseme  
on jäänud

Su kümnetuhat kogutud raamatut on jäänud

ja meie jalutusrajad,

kus sõnu polnud vaja

Lahkusid

ja viimased veinikärbsed jäid

kööki õunte ümber hõljuma,

peotäis hiinalaternaid kummutile vaasi,

Rapla kiriku kaks torni jäid koduvärvast paistma –

üks ema ja teine isa torn –,

nii uskusin lapsena

Uued kõnniteed ja ringrajad said sinu surmapäevaks valmis

ja Kõpsoni kivi, mille alt jaaniõiti karjakella kõlinate kuulatasime,

on vajunud sügavamale maa rüppe

Eriti kirgas Pegasususe tähtkujus Jupiter

meie õunapuude kohal

jäi näitama teed Linnuteele

Su imelik kolmnurkne kell jäi

teleka peale tiksuma

ja kastitais sinu taimeteesid

jäi ootama külalisi

Isegi kamin jäi küdema ja saun sooja –

et te, sõbrad, ikka tuleksite  
mu ema ja isa tornide linna  
mändide tagusesse majja

Lahkusid nii ruttu,  
et me ei jõudnud õieti hüvastigi jätta  
Kas see tähendab, et meile on antud  
veel kohtuda?

See on esimene laupäev ilma sinuta  
ja need on esimesed jõulud, kus sa oma kõuehäälel  
ei loe jõuluvanale Jesseninilt:  
... „Kõnnib valgel märal Kristus meie ees  
Meie usk on värav tõesse enda sees“ ...

Varsti tuleb kevad  
Ja ma ei näe enam su silmi, kus päev-päevalt kasvab  
rännukihk,  
aga su sünnipäevahommikul loen sulle ikka jälle oma lapsena tehtud luuletust:

„Märtsilumest lõhnab hommik,  
pungi ajab hekk  
Käigu hästi sinu kummik  
keset sulavett“

Ausalt, ma ei tea ühtegi säärast  
värsket õhu sõltlast  
nagu sina olid  
Kevadeti põgenesid sa suveks otsaks  
verandele magama  
ja ainult igatsus ema ja AK uudiste järele  
suutis sind vahel tuppa meelitada

Üksi läksid sa,  
isa,  
meid ei lubatud sinu juurde  
Tallinna mattis lumetorm

Hommik tuli selge ja väga vaikne  
täis uut ja värsket õhku

See kõik on nüüd sulle

## Lament for My Father

Kristiina Ehin

You were born on a day when the drowsy land showed itself shyly  
from beneath the March snow  
Ploughing was still done with horses then  
and carriages thundered through Tallinn  
It was still the first  
Estonian Republic  
and no one knew  
what would happen  
When the German forces were nearing Estonia  
you learnt how to walk  
And when your mother was held for questioning by the Gestapo  
for 24 hours  
you must have learnt  
how to stay calm

Now you have gone away so suddenly

The white curtains have stayed hanging in the living room  
pine trees dripping December evening rain  
The chairs whose reupholstering we had once argued about  
have stayed behind  
your ten thousand books have stayed  
and the paths of our walks  
where words were not needed  
You went away  
and the last fruit flies stayed  
floating round the apples in the kitchen,  
a handful of Chinese lanterns in a vase on the sideboard,  
Rapla church's two steeples have stayed in view from the garden gate –  
one the mother steeple and the other the father –  
so I believed as a child  
New footpaths and tracks were finished on the day you died  
And Kõpson's boulder where on midsummer eve we listened out  
for a cow bell's clatter from underneath  
has sunk even deeper into the lap of the land  
Jupiter particularly bright in the constellation Pegasus  
over our apple trees  
has stayed to show the way to the Milky Way  
Your peculiar three-cornered clock has stayed  
ticking on the telly  
and a boxful of your herb teas  
has stayed to await visitors  
Even the fireplace has stayed to burn and the sauna warm  
so that you, friends, would still come

to our house behind the pine trees  
in the town of my mother and father steeples

You went away so quickly  
that I couldn't even properly say good-bye  
Does that mean it will be given us  
to meet again?

This is the first Saturday without you  
and this the first Christmas where in your thunderous voice  
you won't be reading Yesenin to Father Christmas:  
"... Before us on a white mare goes Christ  
Our belief is the gateway to truth within us..."

Soon spring will come  
And I won't see your eyes anymore where day by day  
your wanderlust grows,  
but on your birthday morning I will still read you the poem I wrote as a child:

"The smell of morning in March snow  
the hedge begins to bud  
Easily may your gumboots go  
amid the thawing mud"

Honestly, I know of no one else  
so dependent on fresh air  
as you were  
In spring you fled till summer's end  
to sleep on the veranda  
and only a yearning for Mother and the TV news  
was able to entice you indoors now and again

You went alone  
Father  
We weren't allowed to go to you  
Tallinn was buried in a snowstorm

Morning came clear and very quiet  
full of new fresh air

All of it is for you now

*Translated by Ilmar Lehtpere*

# Short Outlines of Books by Estonian

b y B r i t a M e l t s , R u t t H i n r i k u s a n d

Ott Kilusk

## **Veidrikud ja võpatused**

(Cranky Characters and Sudden Starts)

Tallinn: Menu, 2012. 159 pp

ISBN: 9789949470983

## **Oktoobrikuine tuuker**

(A Diver in October)

Tallinn: Kirjastuskeskus, 2010. 63 pp

ISBN: 9789949445356

*Cranky Characters and Sudden Starts* is a story about a boy growing up in an out-of-the-way back country village, about his fears, loneliness and horrifying sudden starts, about how he, step by step, has discovered different sides of the “rattling life” and has adapted to them, about his school life and his secret fantasy that his will power is in control of everything that is going on in the village and, finally, about the gradual falling to pieces of this fantasy. The book offers an extremely naturalistic insight into the Estonian village life of the 1980s, where ever more horrible and sometimes even unaccountable events take place, participated in by a rich

gallery of extremely cranky and marginal characters. Although the book has been put together of sometimes nightmarish memory images that have been etched into the protagonist’s brain, it is still a work of fiction, where tension is enhanced by flashes of imagination, dimming contours, oscillations on the borders between dreams and wakefulness, and stimulating enthusiasm for *spoonerism*. In this world that has shifted from reality, reality-based memories are often mixed with gloomy visions that reveal the shadow of surrealism over the village. “And reality can prove to be more visionary than any dream, no matter how restless it may be ...”. *Cranky Characters and Sudden Starts* contains hints of Ott Kilusk’s (born in 1975) literary debut – his collection of poetry *A Diver in October*, which introduces the unusual world of cranky characters and sudden starts.

*A Diver in October* is a collection of poetry that has two powerfully related facets that have a clearly defined common area, but still differ from each other. One of these facets, the more important one, draws together, similarly

# Authors

J a n i k a   K r o n b e r g

to *Cranky Characters* ..., verse stories that are more or less related to real memories of a ghastly "village on the edge of nowhere". In this key, the main motifs of the book are revealed in its most characteristic poem: "INTO THE SKY ABOVE THE VILLAGE ON THE EDGE OF NOWHERE / the evening dusk makes a cut / in the pains of being / moulding houses creak amidst this all [—] just as if something is being born somewhere / something very awful – the village is falling asleep/ its senseless mind full of acrid rye whiskey." Nostalgic moments are one by one disclosed; sometimes they are very closely related to his lyrical self (for instance, to his family), and sometimes they simply render a more general mood of a grotesque "sleepy" small village full of strange people suffering from the "pains of being", rotten houses, ghastly events and other similar features. But despite its depressing motifs, *A Diver* ... is not a completely pessimistic and gloomy book. Its hints of the past and descriptions of personal experiences often

have an additional unexpected surrealist twist. This twist forms the second facet of the collection, showing something completely different: twisted visions, tricks, surreal dreams, all of which emphasise the horror and cryptic nature of the world of this text, but still avoid hopeless pessimism – gloominess is always spiced with a faint smile. In such a way, Kilusk's poetry and prose texts are engaged in an inseparable dialogue.

Kilusk is an author of mature spirit, using an elaborate form. His sensitive sentences, free verse and rhymed poetry build up a strange marginal world, based on a disconsolate, but interesting, far-off village, governed by a mood of decay, horror and fascinating mysticism, whose atmosphere is still ghastly to an extent – but this attracts the reader. "WE CANNOT RETURN TO THE YESTERDAY / where the quarrel began / but we can go / to the place where we lived before." Kilusk's works offer us ways of such turnings back that are certainly worth exploring. **BM**

Aime Hansen

**Ma olen mereingel**

(I Am a Sea Angel)

Tallinn: Verb, 2011. 68 pp

ISBN: 9789949912421

The fourth book of poetry by Aime Hansen (born in 1962), a traveller through life, a woman of letters and a theatre enthusiast, contains love, memories and prayers. It is not easy to relate to Hansen's poetry – for decades, many of her readers have been at a loss and shied away from it. According to the author, her inner development has differed from the traditional, "I probably experienced the metaphysical, mystical and existential before the social and psychological. Perhaps this is why many people found my poems hard to understand – they lacked any social direction and there were no feelings and conditions in the everyday sense of the word. They also lacked eroticism and intellectual word play." Being a poet, Hansen displays her journey in the spiritual space. With the help of images poured into words, she attempts to return to the initial unity and primordial state so that a human soul is able to experience eternity right here and sense the ties between life and the power of nature. In another, theatre-related context, the poet has said, "Alienated humans should recover their ties with Nature, the Cosmos and the unity of the world." The author herself has not yet completed her journey across time and space towards the balance between humans and nature; *I Am a Sea Angel* marks a stop in this journey.

In her first collection of poetry, Aime Hansen opened the cycle of poems "Inside Me and Around Me" with the lines: "Dedicated to Aime Hansen, / who lives in an unknown, / incomprehensible, invisible, inaudible / and imperceptible for the author anti-world /to Aime Hansen whom the author cannot find / or whom she perhaps / has already found in the very beginning, / but she does not know it, / which is even worse,

/ or maybe she does not exist at all / in any world." This is one of the keys to reading and understanding Hansen's poetry: the author sets into words her own inner explorations and discoveries in the surrounding world, her experiences, sensations, games, and a certain milieu in a shadow world or "imperceptible anti-world". A traditional description is not sufficient to make this world perceptible; it is necessary to engage in playfulness and the magical and mystical sense of life and the world. Hansen creates a strange dislocated world that behaves according to the rules known only to the poet – resulting in a reality of pictorial images that open up piece by piece, or in a "world behind the mirror", containing the author's spirituality, her distinctive world-view and, as a network of experiences, her inner sense of the unity of the world or space, full of mysticism, mythology, visions and intuitions. Here, the earthly and the otherworldly are related to each other, and all memories acquire a magical meaning and fuse with fantasy games and images. This personal world creates a quivering shyness, it does not open up to everybody, and it is saturated with exoticism, multiculturalism, intuition and theatricality.

Over the course of time, due to the way her writing has become more and more narrative-like, Hansen's poetry has become clearer, more accessible and integrated – the lyrical narratives, even too long for poetry, do not remain incomplete as often happened before in her poetry. However, she has not lost her huge versatility: the poet Aime Hansen travels in her own world and she has made her life into art. She sees the movements of the world and reacts to them; she takes "magical journeys" and records them in stories; she finds sense in her inner progress and mediates it to others; she penetrates other cultures and, by using all these experiences, she creates poetic images; she aims at open natural spaces (e.g. the sea and deserts), but she still remembers to pay attention to small things as well. **BM**

Mari Vallisoo  
**Koidutäht koolivihikus**  
(The Morning Star in a School Notebook)  
Tartu: Ilmamaa, 2011. 86 pp  
ISBN: 9789985774014

*The Morning Star in a School Notebook* is Mari Vallisoo's (born in 1950) eighth collection of poems. Besides this book, she published the collection of selected poetry *Tabamatu toalävel (The Unattainable on the Room's Threshold)* last year. Before the appearance of these books, she had been silent for a decade, thus further confirming her idea of being visible only in her texts. This is a rare phenomenon in Estonian poetry, mostly adding to the mystical poetical space surrounding the texts.

Vallisoo has for decades represented the "rustic" poetry of Estonia in the sense that her poetry circles around ordinary everyday matters. However, the reader must always be watchful, as even the making of soup is never depicted for no particular reason, and even such a simple activity is surrounded by mystery and there may be some hints of the metaphors of an unattainable world; emotional moments of fate are unavoidably related to the earth ("Yes, in this landscape / the fate of love letters is sad"). Under the cloak of simple homely space and everyday routine, Vallisoo's poetry is, actually, full of subjectively sensitive metaphysics. The setting of everyday details into verbal relationships reveals their rich meanings, which may stay hidden or may even be impossible in routine life, thus bringing to light the poet's new, personal spiritual dimension and elegantly joining the simple and the elevated.

Vallisoo's mystical personal world playfully swings between reality and unreality. Sometimes the poet moves simultaneously in ancient times, in her childhood and in the present day, feeding visionary and only guessable "other" worlds. But it is not only time that moves across borders; the poet puts into words the hidden layers of her own private environment and,

by doing so, opens up the wide "back rooms of spacetimes" and, when she reaches the fateful borders of these spaces, points at the "unattainable threshold". "With my own clear eyes / I suddenly SAW / the everyday life of gods." Vallisoo writes these dusky unattainable sensations into a clear verbal picture.

In her new collection, the poet shows her worldly-wise perspective from many different angles. She points out the regularities of natural sciences that are also valid in the world of words and humanity; she shapes a "geometrical dream" and "weighs the hidden matter". "I want to create a new world / to create, to add, to square it. / But I can't! Physics is in my way!" In another poem, she points out, somewhat sadly, an experience which could be taken as a general reason for worrying in present-day Estonia, where rural areas are becoming more and more marginal: "I became sad / when I saw abandoned places / where my youth, my childhood / where people left / I hear footsteps / and smell a pine forest / smelling of resin / I remember the arch of a cave roof." She is also unpretentiously critical of the everyday wasting of natural resources, showing a mild eco-critical voice. Mostly, she impressively draws attention to permanent spiritual values, to the human soul and the worldly wisdom and legends that have gained weight by persisting through time. Her simple, but at the same time mystical world, which is partly based on the mythical past of her nation and partly on her private home environment, forms, together with the primeval essence of nature, the continuity of life that is carried by words full of the power of truth. Her path of words is summed up by the lines: "I am searching for justice in word play, / for truth in the power of the sound of words." **BM**

Mari Vallisoo (Photo by Scampix)



Karl Martin Sinijärv  
**Krūmitor 0671**

(Nosiop tar 0671)

Não kirik. 2011. pp. 199.

ISBN 978-9949-21-844-8

Karl Martin Sinijärv (1971) arrived in Estonian literature as a kind of Wunderkind at the end of the 1980s, on the wave of the excitement of national re-awakening. The literary trend that he advanced, with some other younger authors, was called ethnofuturism and was accompanied by an ideological justification, as it contained both national and cosmopolitan influences. Sinijärv has borrowed his form methods from ancient Finno-Ugric culture, as well as from Western fashionable trends, and has therefore been called an avant-garde traditionalist. Since 2007, Sinijärv has been the chairman of the Estonian Writers' Union, and he has been producing a cultural programme on TV for several years.

The bulky collection *Krūmitor 0671*, with its attractive cover, is Sinijärv's eighth book. The first cycle, a quarter of the book, offers a selection of previously published material. The cryptic title is formed by the words "rat poison" backwards in Estonian, although what the number means I haven't a clue. The role of playing around with words in his earlier works has diminished in *Krūmitor*, but the book still offers the reader a generous

amount of verbal play based on polysemy, uses various possibilities to achieve ambiguity, and dismantles language in other ways as well, always in order to create a new and surprising poetic language. The largely free-verse form varies from brief haiku imitations to lengthy lines and Mayakovski staircases, although a more traditional form is represented as well.

The first thing that attracts attention and fascinates is indeed Sinijärv's language. To achieve its splendid sound, the author uses head, end and leonine rhymes, neologisms, archaisms, methods based on early 20th-century Estonian language innovation, and glossolalia. Sometimes the reader does not in fact have to make an effort to understand the meaning, because it might not exist or the meaning is provided by the readers themselves. At the same time, critics have noted with admiration that *Krūmitor* can easily be recommended to people who do not really care for poetry. Understanding the numerous allusions, of course, adds to the enjoyment and expands the context of the poems.

Happily playing around with pleasant-sounding linguistic tricks, Sinijärv's work also leads the reader towards more general serious topics. The poet's status and mother tongue matter a great deal to Sinijärv, and he reveals a strong sense of empathy towards human beings. Occasionally, playing with words, images and sounds reveals a touch of cool Nordic darkness and melancholy, which are, however, melted by the poet's own spiritual warmth.

In sum, this is one of the most verbally skilled works in Estonian poetry in 2011; its variegated mosaic, matching the cover, forms a perfectly composed whole. Sinijärv's text-machine is well-oiled and skilfully balanced: nothing is excessive and, despite its bulk, the book's lavish witticisms never allow it to become dull. **JK**



Karl Martin Sinijärv (photo by Seapix)

Kai Aareleid

## Vene veri

(Russian Blood)

Tallinn, Varrak, 2011. 199 pp

ISBN: 9789985323748

Kai Aareleid (born 1972) is a translator and editor, and language is her everyday tool. *Russian Blood* is her first book of prose. She does tricks with her language. The reception of her book has been good and it has even been nominated for some annual awards.

At first glance, it may look like just another book of somebody's life story. When talking about a life-story book, we usually mean a certain type of shallow text about the author's life, centring on relationships and focussing on advertising and the business interests of the author. In the last decade, the Estonian book market has been drowning in such texts. This seems to be a kind of snowball effect since "if you do not have [have not published] a life story, you simply do not exist".

However, *Russian Blood* is something else. The book alternates a diary-like chronicle of everyday life with a string of memory images, but an undeniable literary ambition is there and, in this case, it is well founded.

According to the author, the writing of the book took her three slow years. The book covers four years, framed by an arrival and a departure. The location is St. Petersburg. The composition of the book was carefully considered. *Whatever am I doing here?*, muses the main character, waiting her turn on the Estonian-Russian border. *Whatever am I doing here, you were thinking. Waiting*

*for, ... for escaping across [the border].*

The "you" to whom the protagonist turns, elegantly changing her point of view, is her great-grandmother, from whom she has inherited her "Russian blood".

Further on, the narrator holds in her hands the story-lines of several people and the text flows like a river over two different planes. From only fleetingly mentioned facts, we learn that the narrator has had four children, and small everyday events now and then cause swirls in the observing and musing flow of the text.

In the time-line of the present, the narrator observes her surroundings: the city where she has to spend a certain amount of time, where the air is full of unknown dangers. The city of St. Petersburg, much glorified in Russian literature, always rising like a phoenix from the ashes, hides numerous different pasts that have left their mark on the city and its people.

The life of the great-grandmother Aleksandra, memories of whom fill the plane of the past, was much more eventful and dramatic. While searching for her in the very environment where she had once lived and loved, the present-day protagonist grows to understand her and to feel her nearness.

*Russian Blood* is a book about memory and the ties of blood and time. Narrated in a restrained way, the plot has, due to its refinement, a slight feeling of a shadow theatre, and its two-dimensional characters remind us of dolls with whom the narrator plays out the story of the ties between generations. And whether this is the family story of the author, or whether the narrator is only one of the characters, is not important after all. **RH**

Jim Ashilevi

## Ma olen elus olemise tunne

(I Am the Feeling of Being Alive)

Luige, Verb, 2011. 188 pp

ISBN: 9789949912438

*I Am the Feeling of Being Alive* is Jim Ashilevi's first novel. Actually, Ashilevi (born 1984) is not an unknown name – he is well known as the host of a TV culture broadcast. His play *Like Boys in the Rain* was staged at the Endla Theatre in Pärnu. He studied directing at the Viljandi Culture Academy of the University of Tartu. Thus, it is very understandable that his first literary works were drama texts – he has written two plays.

This novel, too, could well be imagined as a play, although the exactness of his phrasing would then, perhaps, suffer. The title of the play *Like Boys in the Rain* immediately gives you the feeling that you can almost touch the atmosphere with your senses. This is even more true of the title of this new novel. These works are stories written by a very young man about his peers – young people whose problem is their discontent, which is caused, perhaps, by the fact that they have no real big problems. We read the words of the protagonist: "... these beautiful unskilled and incapable people and their pornographic shadow theatre", adding also that they "live under a sickly, smothering and congesting cover". What is this smothering cover, and who or what is threatening them? What kind of life do they lead?

The protagonist works at an advertising agency in the capital. He has a friend, a twin sister, a girl friend and a lot of acquaintances. His problems are a heavy loan he has taken out to buy a flat, and his inability to feel deep and overwhelming emotions. Similar problems are depressing his friends as well. They are very clearly unable to sort

out their feelings and leanings. We cannot be sure whether he is drawn towards or detached from his friend by latent homosexuality, or whether his strong attraction to his sister hints at a mild temptation to incest.

We get the feeling that these people may endanger themselves because they are frail, and they do not want to become strong. Rather, they want to detach themselves from reality and from each other in order to experience a more real form of existence and avoid drowning in the vulgarities of life. They always have the feeling that, if only they could overcome one more problem, they would be able to reach a much longed for next level that guarantees satisfaction.

This rather short novel is written in sensitive and supple language. Its subject – yearning for real life – is serious and seems to be very important to the characters, as well as to readers of the same age.

Ashilevi proves to be promising in this genre as well, and I believe that we will hear much about him in the future.

(And by the way, this is his true name, not a pseudonym.) **RH**



Jim Ashilevi (Photo by Scanpix)

Mats Traat

## Vastsed Harala elulood

(Recent Life Stories of Harala)

Tartu: Ilmamaa, 2011. Pp. 192

ISBN 9789985774199

Mats Traat (b. 1936), the grand old man of Estonian literature, has, both in his prose and poetry, been talking about Estonian history and the fate of (country) people for half a century. Just as long is the time that he has been talking about the life stories of Harala. The “epitaphs”, written since 1961, i.e. laconic biographies in verse of people buried in the Harala cemetery, were for the first time gathered into the collection of poetry *Life Stories of Harala* in 1976. Ten or eleven years ago, when an updated version of the first collection and *New Life Stories of Harala* appeared, it seemed quite likely that more was to come about Harala. Especially considering the huge popularity of biographies and descriptions of people’s traumatic past in the Estonian literary field, it was only logical that Traat would want to keep his Harala people going, with all their life tragedies and fears.

Harala is a fictional place created by Mats Traat, and all the characters who tell their stories through the epitaphs are fictional as well. These invented biographies of people from a village cemetery, in verse form, have three main aims. Firstly, the obvious and rather monumental aim is to depict Estonians’ past, creating poetic narratives of national traumatic experiences, and in a sense also creating history through various human destinies. According to Mats Traat himself, he is a writer who tries to record the vanishing of eras and lifestyles: “Writers are indeed in search of lost time.” Harala life stories, in parallel or in sequence, open up vastly different eras, and bigger or smaller events, mostly in 20<sup>th</sup> century Estonia, which all influence simple people, and bring the past temporally and spatially

closer, demonstrating history’s tight links with individual destinies.

Secondly, and equally important, is to “build” a specific place, although fictional, through people. Literature then makes it part of real Estonia and it expands to become a metonymic generalisation about a bigger whole, Estonia. Harala is home to a group of individuals and to a village community. This space is created by just one person, the author, but he creates it for hundreds of people: via human types living at different times and under different social conditions; the spatial experience varies and Harala as a location becomes a dynamic phenomenon.

The third aim is to depict death, writing “towards death” and in a sense describing (collective) mourning; as Traat has said, “Life is but one big mourning”. This fact indicates why Traat’s Harala is such a miserable, unhappy and difficult place, often shown through descriptions of, and reasons for, death; natural deaths are remarkably scarce in Harala. The location is thus largely mapped by paths of death: the place with the most constant meaning in the village is the cemetery.

At the time the Harala life stories began, in the deepest Soviet era, writing epitaphs constituted a defiant and stubborn act, enabling the poetic form to conceal incidents of history that would have been censored in other forms. *Recent Life Stories of Harala* tackles crucial points in history as before, and the new epitaphs reveal no changes in the mentality of the village community or in human destinies. Thus the function of the publication of 182 “recent” life stories is primarily to maintain the existing poetic place, and there is no doubt that Harala will survive, its inhabitants pass on, and the cemetery expand. Despite the emphasis on transience, the idea of Harala is nevertheless to remember something significant in our shared past, and to reveal it through individual lives. Carried by sadness and anxiety, this is an incredibly vast poetic narrative. **BM**

Margus Tamm  
**Unesnöiduja**

(Dreammancer)

Tallinn: Raudwara, 2011. 190 pp

ISBN: 9789949906994

The book that was given the latest Betti Alver Debut Award has the same title as an Estonian-language collection of Chukchi fairy tales, retold by Andres Ehin and published about 30 years ago – *Dreammancer*. We can find some textual-technical relations between these two *Dreammancers*, but Margus Tamm (born 1977) lets us catch even some more direct glimpses of the older book, “40 days had passed from the death of the president. I knew that precisely after this time, the spiritual body of the person will get free and move over to the upper world. I knew it because it had been written in *Dreammancer*. // I was still rather young when this small book with black covers appeared on shop counters, but unfortunately, I had already learned to read.”

Tamm’s book consists of fragmentary, even somewhat disconnected short pieces of prose that, mainly, record different moments of life in a precise and laconic phrasing without any specific emotions or opinions. By style, we could call it a dispassionate, ‘report-like’ text, but the passion of writing can still very strongly be felt here. Nothing much is going on in these stories, but Tamm has been able to add quite a lot of humour even to these laconic fragments, achieving a colourful mixture of crisp humour (even with absolutely serious and grim subjects), cutting irony, agreeable oddity and

even upside-down elation. The book is based on real life, and its topics come from everyday routine, but the observer of life who records them adds spice with carefully selected notes that mix together intelligent absurd and totally random ramblings. The fresh (social) view of the author and his maturity guarantee the effect of the texts to such an extent that these texts, which are well constructed but use rather passive and descriptive style, are brilliantly carried towards an absurd point that leaves the reader with no impression of passivity.

This so far very well received collection of short prose of Margus Tamm, an artist, graphic designer and cultural critic, originated from his blog entries. (The route from the Internet to a paper book is quite rare today when more and more attention is paid to digital books!) ‘Blogosphere’ is an already entirely accepted phenomenon in Estonian contemporary literature and a blog-like book has already won a literary award. In 2009, the Betti Alver Debut Award was given to another artist, Sandra Jõgeva who, similarly to Margus Tamm, synthesised life and art in her partly blog-based book *Drama Point (Draamapunkt)*. The more famous texts that have so far been converted from an Internet diary to a printed book, Epp Petrone’s *My America (Minu Ameerika, 2007)* and Dagmar Reintam’s *daki. lives. here (daki.elab.siin, 2007)*, have a clear message, but are still rather easy reading. Margus Tamm’s *Dreammancer* cannot really be compared to them because he is an intellectual master of style who does not flaunt his poetical touch or thrilling plot, but stuns his readers with free associations that point out the absurd moments of reality-like life. A drastic example of his style – “I was in a condition, sat on the floor and thought. Looked into the mirror and thought, “I”. This was a pleasant thought. It did me good, I thought some more, “Mmmmm ... I ... I ... I.”” Peeter Sauter has characterised the book on its back cover, “The reason for writing these texts has probably been the wish to search for a high in literature, self-analysis and intellectual thought games.” **BM**



Margus Tamm (Photo by Scampix)

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Prima Vista Festival, Tartu 2011 (Photo by Hanna Hörak)