

spring

# Elm

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# 2013



# Elm

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# (: )kivisildnik

b y P e e t e r H e l m e

**One of the first times (: )kivisildnik (49) was mentioned in the Estonian Literary Magazine was in 1999, when an article about someone else dryly noted that (: )kivisildnik was an author who used “obscene language”. Not the most adequate summary of a writer who by that time had already shocked the public and angered his colleagues more than some other author could in a whole lifetime.**

## **Routine sales job**

(: )kivisildnik started as a boldly experimental poet. He appeared on the literary scene in the late 1980s in Tartu, where, in a situation where the state systems of literature and publishing had collapsed, censorship disappeared and, in the euphoria caused by the overall freedom, a gang of poets founded a literary group called Hirohall. It consisted of five members (Jüri Ehlvest, Kauksi Ülle, (: )kivisildnik, Valeria Ränik and Karl Martin Sinijärv), whose biggest contribution was introducing the concept of ethno-futurism. The term was invented by Sinijärv and was supposed to link archaic, ancient, and uniquely Estonian ethnic content with a modern, occasionally even futurist form. Or fill an archaic form with modern content. From this, however, (: )kivisildnik soon moved on to a more radical approach. His craziness, in a good sense, was probably enhanced by working at the newspaper *Post*. It is quite difficult to explain this publication to younger Estonians today, let alone to foreigners, but it was, to put it briefly, a paper that published tall tales. No kidding.

By that time (: )kivisildnik had already published the now chrestomatic parody lexicon *The Soviet Estonian Writers Union – up to 1981, essential*, where the poet adorned his colleagues-writers with epithets such as “my bastard”, “creep” or “forbidden poop”.

After the toughening and bracing years at *Post*, (: )kivisildnik became an ad man for ten years. In the magical world of advertising, he soon mastered the skill of, besides writing shocking texts, behaving outrageously. In the mid-1990s he occasionally performed in a strange, partly black, partly transparent costume, wearing a round black hat adorned with a plus sign, in presenting his novel *Loomade peal katsetatud inimene* (Man Tested on Animals, 1997).

Today he looks at his activities back then with mild self-irony, saying that “Many poets never get anywhere, least of all into consciousness; therefore, the choice of hat was a stroke of luck”,

# From *enfant terrible* to heavy artillery man

although all of it – costume, hat and swagger – was just a “routine sales job, nothing else.”

## Divine Revealer

Instead of his own work, (:)kivisildnik is currently focusing on his own publishing house, *Jumalikud Ilmutused* (Divine Revelations). He is among the few active Estonian writers who channels his energy, which he previously used for picking fights with other writers in the press, on radio, on television or in poems, into shaping the Estonian literary landscape: “Creating cultural values is worth the effort, even if nobody uses them. The number of general benefits with permanent value has increased, at least some people do not contribute to pyramid schemes and other such self-deluded undertakings, and doing this helps people to maintain their common sense much more effectively than any other considerably duller and more inferior work.”

However, this does not mean that the old fighter has retreated or that there has been a redrawing of battlelines: (:)kivisildnik is no weary veteran, but continues to be known as an active social thinker, whose opinion pieces mix radical social ideas with an excellent sense of language. In the latter, (:)kivisildnik resembles Karl Martin Sinijärv, his contemporary, a member of the old literary group, and currently the chairman of the Estonian Writers' Union: both men possess extremely rich vocabularies, and

play masterful games with sounds, initial rhymes and unexpected meanings of words.

## They don't make them like that any more

At times, however, (:)kivisildnik's actions leave you confused: he can be seen ranting on the telly or calling himself a genius in a newspaper, but then you chance upon a book by him or by one of his disciples, and nothing remains of all that mudslinging and scandalous behaviour – the book presents high-quality poetry, in content, style and language. What's happening?

“I gladly represent everything confusing”, replies the poet, with a benevolent smile, sitting under the shade of old trees at his Sanga farm in the depths of Pärnu County. “It is better for the masses to be confused rather than dumbed down by silly entertainment, excited about sporting news or mocked by the propaganda of warmongers. Amidst the media's unambiguous sales truths, a nice dose of confusion has a truly healthy effect. There are no high or low genres for me; everything must be done properly.”

And this is exactly what (:)kivisildnik does. Divine Revelations has already published about fifty books and during the last six or seven years has become not just a publishing house that regularly introduces new and interesting poets, but has also



(:)kivisildnik (Photo by Scampix)

acquired the reputation of a tight sieve. Whoever manages to get through can be genuinely proud, because (:)kivisildnik chooses very carefully indeed and is, in addition, an attentive, patient and excellent editor. They don't make them like that any more. With masochistic satisfaction he admits that "publishing poetry is a self-destructive activity and you have to make sure to be patient. I am prepared to suffer this nightmare only when the manuscript is truly first-class."

### **Aesthete by obligation**

(:)kivisildnik's own writing has not suffered as a result. In 2010 he published *Liivlased ja saurused. Valuraamatu I köide* (Livonians and Dinosaurs. Book of Pain, Volume I). The sequel appeared last year: *Soari evangelium. Valuraamatu II köide* (Gospel of Soar. Book of Pain II). Both powerful texts, topically merciless – once again the good

old extinction of Estonians – and stylistically polished like sparkling diamonds. The author himself said “Hard work without any distractions has turned me into an aesthete”, and this is especially true of his own poetry, which does not tolerate a single superfluous word, ill-chosen rhyme-rhythm or wobbly sentence. Everything is measured and precise, but not in the least lifeless; instead, it is organic, bubbling, ebullient, full of fight and anxiety, a sense of danger, aggressiveness and acuity – all essential (:)kivisildnik.

The essential (:)kivisildnik, however, has undergone changes as well. Until *Livonians...*, he seemed somehow uncaring, throwing words around, more focused on politics. In his new books, he reveals his more reflective, philosophical, and if not more resigned then definitely more conciliatory side, as well as his darker side, especially in *Soar*. As he himself admitted, “childhood was over, nothing remarkable about this, it’s happened before”, and he now looks at everything more broadly. When Sven Sildnik appeared on our literary scene a quarter of a century ago as (:)kivisildnik, his main aim was to settle scores with predecessors and the communist regime. Today, the heedless, hectoring person has turned into a no less loud, but considerably more deliberate thinker, whose chief concern is certainly not tearing anyone to pieces, but building up, creating.

“Estonian literature matters to me a great deal,” he says without a hint of pathos, merely noting the fact that “it is like building your own home. This structure does not, unfortunately, yet have a roof, so you cannot be there when it’s rainy and cold. More work must be done, an effort must be made, the foundation is solid and much has been done to build the walls. The material is there, but there’s also a major complication: there is no one with a decent plan; it has not been understood that Estonian literature needs an architectural solution too, and won’t move forward until it is found.”

(:)kivisildnik

For years, Sven Sildnik, born in Rakvere on 3 January 1964, has been inserting before his *nom de guerre* a colon in parentheses – a snout. This is the poet’s expression of his condescending and sarcastic attitude towards the world. In Estonian literature, the poet has shown his snout for about twenty-five years, having been a member of the group Hirohall in the late 1980s, the founder of the Estonian Kostabi Society and a member of the Tartu Young Authors’ Association. In 1993-1996 he worked at the scandalous tabloid *Post*, and later in advertising for ten years. Currently he is a freelancer, residing at his farm in Sanga with his wife and two sons. From there, (:)kivisildnik manages the publishing house *Divine Revelations* and thus actively shapes the Estonian literary scene. (:)kivisildnik finds time to often travel to various literary events in Pärnu, Tartu and Tallinn if he needs to introduce his new authors and utter some cutting remarks to the expectant audience.

**Divine Revelations**

Since 2005 this ambitiously named enterprise has been publishing new literature, over fifty books altogether, most of them within covers made of recycled paper in pastel tones. In addition to poetry, (:)kivisildnik has published a few novels and article collections.

Although (:)kivisildnik categorically denies a wish to establish a school, one feature of *Divine Revelations* is its leader’s uncompromising attitude and combative style. The range of published authors is impressive: they differ aesthetically and ethically, in age, gender, educational background and literary experience. Some are productive and established writers, such as Jan Kaus, Armin Kõomägi and Jürgen Rooste, while some are publishing their first books, e.g. Priit Salumaa, Siim Pauklin and Kaido Tee.

# Jüri Talvet on Juhan

by Rein Veidemann

Jüri Talvet, the long-time professor of comparative literature at the University of Tartu, author of numerous essay collections and translation books, editor-in-chief of the international literary journal *Interlitteraria*, and also a poet whose work has been translated into many languages, has during the past five years become one of the leading Liiv experts in Estonia. The devotion of the foremost expert in today's Estonia on Spanish and Latin-American literature to an Estonian writer is actually quite surprising. The more so as most of us believe that we know this particular writer rather well. Jüri Talvet must thus be filled with a special enthusiasm for Liiv in order to rediscover the meaning of Liiv's work. In the following conversation with Jüri Talvet, I will try and reveal the background of Talvet's Liiv-zeal, one aspect being the publication of his remarkable monograph *Juhan Liivi luule* ('Poetry of Juhan Liiv'), published in 2012.

**When was your first contact with Liiv's work? As for me, the encounter was rather 'prosaic': "Peipsi peal" ('On Lake Peipsi'). What about you?**

My father's bookshelves in Pärnu contained the first Soviet-era larger selection of Estonian poetry (*Eesti luule antoloogia*, 1955), as well as Juhan Liiv's *Teosed* ('Works', 1954), published by Aarne Vinkel. For some reason, I remembered quite a few poems from that anthology for a long time, for example Liiv's "Mets kohas" ('The Forest Rustled'). But it could well be that we learned that poem earlier at school. In any case, this was my first encounter with Liiv. At school, we also read

his humorous (and at the same time deeply philosophical!) prose piece "Peipsi peal" ('On Lake Peipsi') – which besides "Igapäevane lugu" ('An Everyday Tale') is his most often translated short story –, and a funny poem with powerful ideas, "Aafrika mehed" ('African Men').

**Do you remember encountering an overwhelming feeling when you first read Liiv?**

I do – the sadness and pain of existence. It took almost half a century before I realised that the special persuasiveness of this poem (he wrote it quite early in life, before mental illness struck) relies on ambiguity: it combines

# Liiv and His Poetry

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the desire for life and freedom with the perception of life's boundaries, intuitive knowledge that death harasses and liberates at the same time.

**In 1997 you had another kind of encounter with Liiv. Your poem “Armastus” (‘Love’) received the Juhan Liiv Poetry Award, which was founded in 1965, but was abolished by the official regime between 1970 and 1984. “Armastus” has had an unprecedented fate: it has been translated into eighty world languages! This is probably the only Estonian work of literature – every poem is, after all, a piece of literature – with this kind of circulation. Did this award also mark the beginning of your road towards Liiv’s life and work, towards a deeper and more thorough encounter than you had had through school textbooks?**

I would like to make it clear that “Armastus” in 80 languages is available only on my homepage. It is a seemingly very simple poem, which nevertheless contains a little dispute with Kierkegaard about perhaps the most essential issue in life. This is probably the reason why “Armastus”, to my great surprise, has been so warmly and extensively received. It was read aloud in 16 languages on St Catherine’s Day, an event organised in Australia by the Estonian culture activists Rein and Heidi Aedma. The Juhan Liiv Poetry Award naturally encouraged me immensely. My next link with Liiv is the fact that since the award I have been a member of the jury. I therefore had to constantly reflect on the essential Liiv qualities expected of the award candidates’ poems. The annual trip to Alatskivi, exchanging ideas about Liiv and Liiv-like poetry in the very room of the simple farm where he once sat at his desk writing or meditating, has brought the poet closer to me. As is often the case, however, you need a special

impetus or awakening that coincides with the moment when you have matured enough to recognise it. That did not happen before 2005 or 2006.

**I discovered that you have written other Liiv-inspired poems, e.g. “Ta lendab mesipuu poole” (‘It Flies to the Hive’) in the collection *Unest, lumest*. It seems to me that you undertook the reinterpretation of Liiv through translating him together with your friend and colleague H. L. Hix. The extremely national and untranslatable Juhan Liiv in English! Translated into this leading world language, does Liiv seem like a world writer too? And what makes him that?**

Liiv’s famous poem “Ta lendab mesipuu poole” was indeed my awakening and incentive to take up Liiv more seriously. My old Spanish friend Albert Lázaro Tinaut and I translated a small selection of Estonian poetry for the Spanish literary magazine *Turia* (no.80, 2006-2007). I provided the literal translation of this poem on the basis of Vinkel’s choices (1954/1956, 1989), but at some point I noticed that ‘eagle’ in the last line did not quite suit ‘honeybee’ of the main image – at least my poetic instincts refused to accept it. I then looked up the Liiv collection compiled by August Sang in the series “Väike luuleraamat” (‘A Little Book of Poetry’, 1969) and found there the final line, which read “ning tõttad isamaa poole!” (“and hurry toward the homeland!”). I tracked down the first printing of this poem, published during Liiv’s lifetime in the magazine *Linda* (1905), and this confirmed my suspicions. The poem on the first page, in large letters, ends with the line “ja tõttad isamaa poole!” The discrepancy in such a significant bit of the text that nobody, as far as I know, had tried to explain made me think that it would perhaps be necessary to review the entire Liiv

poetry canon. First, I compared the published texts. On that basis, the first bilingual Estonian–English selection was born, in cooperation with my friend the poet H. L. Hix, *Meel paremat ei kannata. The Mind Would Bear No Better* (Tartu University Press, 2007). It consisted of slightly over 40 poems. In the meantime (2011), some new translations appeared in influential US poetry journals, such as *Poetry* and *Rowboat*, and from there they found their way into various American blogs. This year is the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Juhan Liiv's death, and the Toronto publishing house Guernica should publish our new, extended bilingual selection, which including 'fragments' contains over one hundred poems. It is quite clear, however, that mere translations make no-one a world writer. We need new treatments of Liiv in bigger international languages. Translations produce a prerequisite for evoking interest outside Estonia. In a recent reflection on comparative literature and world literature, I divide the canon of world literature into 'active', 'passive' and 'potential'. The active canon comprises authors constantly in the focus of international critical debate. Nobody and nothing from Estonia qualifies as active. In the passive canon, there is Kreutzwald's epic *Kalevipoeg* (Son of Kalev). It is practically never absent from bigger world literature lexicons; complete translations have appeared already in 13 languages, although critical debate is still lacking. Liiv, on the other hand, has been considered something 'fully Estonian' for a long time. As far as I am concerned, both *Kalevipoeg* and Liiv's poetry contain originality that does not pale even when placed in the context of Western or world literature. Both deserve a place in the great active canon of world literature, but no miracle is ever going to put them there. It takes a lot of hard work to overcome the existing myths and prejudices in Estonia.

**It seems to me that your idea of Liiv on the whole aims to liberate the legend-ridden Estonian genius and give him a new, even more significant life. Similar liberation attempts have been made before. I remember Paul-Eerik Rummo's poem "Ikka Liivist mõeldes" ('Always Thinking about Liiv'): "Ainult mitte seda müüti, seda uhket and**

**suurt / siin vaikiva, leinaliselt valge / pakasetaeva all." Your focus is different: the correspondence of Liiv's destiny and work to our deeper spiritual essence ...maybe he was a pathfinder... someone who formulated the limiting values of our existence ...Am I moving along the right lines?**

If anyone is still interested in pure Estonian conscience, he finds it in Liiv. It is a dreadful pity that people, influenced by our current market ideology and media, sincerely believe that money in fact constitutes happiness and comfort. According to Kreutzwald's *Kalevipoeg* and Liiv, if something is subverting Estonia from inside, it is primarily the greed instinct, the upstart's mentality and servility towards the power of the mighty.

**Your monograph reveals previously hidden or even new layers in Liiv's work. The literary historian in me sees a considerable change in the manner of analysis. You try to explain the Liiv-miracle, the fact that poetry for Liiv was an existential act. His life philosophy expressed in fragments rests on the same passion which characterised Erasmus of Rotterdam's ardent praise of life's integrity; you also revised the image of Liiv as a 'tragic genius' promoted by Tuglas. What does our Liiv look like today, after being rediscovered on the edge of the 21<sup>st</sup> century?**

Tuglas did not appreciate Liiv as a thinker. The main thesis in his Liiv treatment was 'a disturbed mind's poetry miracle', which I used as the title of my longer introduction-essay to the third edition of the Liiv monograph by Tuglas, soon to be published. Liiv's greatness, however, largely relies on the integral philosophy behind his poetic images. This is indeed close to Erasmus's observation of life, although quite recently, having read the bulkiest essay by another great Renaissance thinker and humanist Michel de Montaigne, *An Apology for Raymond Sebond*, I am beginning to understand Liiv even more as an original thinker along the same radical anti-anthropocentric lines first drawn by Montaigne in European intellectual life. This means a dialogue with the 'other' on every level: racially, socially, and in



Jüri Talvet (Photo by Scanpix)

terms of gender and species. It also means abandoning the traditional postulate that rational-scientific superiority at the very least guarantees man a certain power and prerogative to destroy nature around him (and within him), as well as humiliating and enslaving any other kind of 'other' (starting with his closest 'other', woman).

**One more observation – the famous simplicity of Liiv. In “Lumehelbeke” (“A Small Flake of Snow”), which has retreated into/ been reduced to a children’s poem, you see quite heavyweight ideas, as in some other seemingly simple poems. What then constitutes the significance of Liiv’s simplicity?**

Liiv’s images hide his integral philosophy of life, and this is what matters. At the same time, the quality of images is important too: unpredictability, unexpected turns and repetitions in the development of a poem. This guarantees an expressive lightness and accessibility, even with a ‘heavy’ idea. Liiv kept searching. Quite a few poems have several versions, and it is impossible to tell which is the best. The publishing house Tänapäev will

soon publish my biggest selection of Liiv’s poetry, on the basis of researching the manuscripts, titled *Lumi tuiskab, mina laulan*. There I publish two versions of the well-known poem “Sügise” (‘Autumn’; Tuglas and after him also Sang used the title “Nõmm”). I am certain that this previously unknown version will find many readers who will take it into their hearts.

**The fact that you try to avoid repeating Liiv’s poems that have become clichés is reflected in the title of your Liiv collections: *Tuulehoog löi vetesse, Meel paremat ei kannata*, and *Oh elul ikka tera on*. Can you name three to five poems that best represent Liiv’s poetry and Liiv as a poet?**

Perhaps more than any other poet Liiv produced poems that have fascinated our poetry-loving readers, since at least the 1930s, with their beauty and depth. Each person has his own taste. “Mets kohas”, “Ta lendab mesipuu poole”, “Hommik” (‘Morning’), “Tule, öö pimedus” (‘Come, Night’s Darkness’) , “Helin” (‘A Sound’) – I could easily add a dozen more that would all perfectly represent Estonian poetry in every corner of the world.

***Juhan Liivi ja Liivist märgitud luulet (1996)*, a collection compiled by Karl Muru, starts with Liiv’s poem “Laulikutele” (‘To Poets’), where Liiv lists everything that a poet has to defend – the beauty, tenderness and love of the big world, warmth hidden in a young heart and pain in the bosom – and asks why all this is so seldom depicted in poetry? Is Liiv’s question still relevant today?**

Poetry cannot be created after a theory or an ideology. People experience awakening in different ways. Writing after some theory or consciously imitating someone else’s manner certainly produces the least amount of good poetry. There are excellent poetry countries, such as Spain, where poetry was ‘in slumber’ for a whole century or bowed too low to external examples (18<sup>th</sup> century). It is not surprising that in some years not a single good poem is written in little Estonia. Luckily, however, they do appear – and secretly, from a ‘shadow’, our Juhan Liiv most certainly provides constant inspiration.

# P o e t r y   b y   J u h a n

## Lumehelbeke

Lumehelbeke  
tasa, tasa  
liugleb aknale,  
tasa... tasa ...

Nagu viibiks ta  
tasa, tasa,  
mõtleks tulles ka:  
tasa, tasa!

Miks nii tuksud, rind?  
Tasa, tasa!  
Rahu otsib sind –  
tasa, tasa...

## A Small Flake of Snow

A small flake of snow,  
silence, silence,  
drifts past the window,  
silence... silence...

As if it were waiting,  
silence, silence,  
as if contemplating:  
silence, silence!

My heart, why beat so?  
Silence, silence!  
Peace waits for you —  
silence, silence...

# L i i v ( 1 8 6 4 – 1 9 1 3 )

## Mets kohas

Mets kohas tumedalt, tõelt...  
Ma kuulasin himuga.  
Ta kohin tiibu laotas  
mu üle ju hällissa.

Ta tume kohin jäi rinda,  
seal kohab nüüd alati –  
ma nagu tad taga leinan,  
ei röömsaks saa iialgi.

## The Forest Rustled

The forest rustled, ominous...  
I listened with foreboding.  
Even over my cradle  
the rustling spread its wings.

The dark rustling settled in,  
and rustles in me always —  
as if in mourning for it  
I'm forbidden any joys.

\*\*\*

Häält otsin taga, mis helisend,  
ja armu, mis õnnistand.  
Hää! aga on helina pikuke –  
arm see ju ei kauaks jäänd.

Hää! aga heliseb u u e s t i .  
Arm igavesti noorusline  
ja päike paistab nii armsasti  
kui tuhandeid aastaid enne.

\*\*\*

I search for the voice that soothed  
and the love that blessed.  
But voice is fleeting as sound —  
love didn't last.

Yet a g a i n the voice sings.  
Love stays always young  
and the sun shines, as loving  
now as in centuries gone.

## Helin

Kui mina olin veel väikene mees,  
üks helin mul helises rinna sees.

Ja kui mina sirgusin suuremaks,  
läks helingi rinna sees kangemaks.

Nüüd on see helin pea matnud mind,  
ta alla rusuks on raugenud rind.

See helin mu elu ja minu hing,  
tal kitsaks on jäänud maapääline ring.

## A Sound

When I was small,  
a sound rang in my breast.

And as I grew,  
the sound in my breast gained force.

Now this sound has almost buried me,  
under it my breast has been ruined.

This sound is my life and my soul,  
for them the earthy circle has narrowed.

Tule, öö pimedus

Tule, öö pimedus,  
võta mind sülle.

Minu päike ei tunne mind,  
öö jäänd mulle.

Ainust tähte sääl pole,  
minul on kole.

Varja mu üle.

Come, Night's Darkness

Come, night's darkness,  
gather me to your lap.

My sun doesn't recognize me,  
the night is left to me.

There's not a single star,  
I am in fear.

Cover me.

### Ta lendab mesipuu poole

Ta lendab lillest lillesse,  
ja lendab mesipuu poole;  
kui kõuepilv tõuseb ülesse,  
ta lendab mesipuu poole.  
Ja langevad teele tuhanded –  
neist koju jõuavad tuhanded.  
Ja viivad vaeva ja hoole  
ja lendavad mesipuu poole.

Nii hing, oh hing, sa raskel a'al –  
kuis ihkad sa isamaa poole;  
kas kodu sa, kas võõral maal:  
kuis ihkad sa isamaa poole!  
Ja puhugu sulle säält surmatuul  
ja lennaku vastu surmakuul:  
sa unustad surma ja hoole  
ja tõttad isamaa poole!

### It Flies to the Hive

It flies from flower to flower,  
it flies to the hive;  
when a thundercloud threatens,  
it flies to the hive.  
Thousands will fall on the way –  
still thousands will reach home.  
They will carry suffering and care  
and fly to the hive.

Thus soul, oh soul, in hard times —  
how you yearn for the homeland;  
at home or in a foreign country:  
how you yearn for the homeland!  
Let a deadly wind blow against you,  
let a deadly bullet meet you,  
you forget death and suffering  
and hurry toward the homeland.

E n g l i s h  
t r a n s l a t i o n  
b y  
J ü r i  
T a l v e t  
a n d  
H .  
L .  
H i x



Juhana Livi (1903)

# Maarja Pärtna

## Thresholds and Possibilities

b y J a y d e W i l l

**Your first book *At the Grassroots*, came out in 2010. In an interview before it came out, you said that you felt you were looking for your voice in your writing. Now that you have published more, and your second collection, *Thresholds and Pillars*, will soon appear, do you feel you have found your voice?**

Yes, I think I have. But this literary voice of mine has turned out to be somewhat polyphonic, or at least that's how that voice sounds to myself in that upcoming second book. There are different layers of intertextuality: some translations intermingled with my own poetry and prose, which, moreover, contain quite a few allusions and also some quotes. So different voices will sometimes intersect with my own, I let them step in and make themselves audible. It's almost like tuning in to another channel for a moment. But even though I talk about multiple voices, there aren't really any recognizable characters or personae there. I'm not really interested in making poetry into some sort of a dramatic text. What interests me is intertextuality – its possibilities as a poetic device.

I have actually always thought that it would be much more interesting to write without developing any individual poetic persona at all – an impossible thing to wish, really.

**Do you think that people have it in them to look past the everyday things and find something meaningful in their lives? It seems you raise that question a lot in your poetry.**

I suppose so, yes. But maybe you don't really need to look past the everyday things.

Perhaps you need to do the exact opposite, to be more mindful about them, to realize them for what they are – your life, your time here. So why waste your life by casting a part of it aside as, for example, too ordinary? What I feel is that a more meaningful life stems from a more mindful life and I hope my poetry reflects that opinion.

**After reading your second collection, I felt that I had somehow metaphysically travelled in a number of places – Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and elsewhere, and not just the big cities, but also places like the Estonian countryside. Did you originally set out to create this kind of effect when you went about putting this collection together?**

I think about places a lot. I think there are two things there – first of all there are attempts to put forward how travelling is experienced as a process and a state of in-betweenness. Being in a new culture always puts things in another perspective. Travelling could also be an exercise in mindfulness – it re-awakens you to the actual physical reality around you. It is a pleasurable thing, to become all eyes and ears again. But when travelling, one also becomes aware of how one does not really belong to the place one is physically located, that home is somewhere else. All in all, travelling stirs things in you – it's a very creative state of mind.

The second thing is that there is indeed some cognitive mapping going on in the book. I have written about several places and if I would actually have to draw a map about them, I would draw it as concentric circles starting from the place I feel most at home and ending

with places that I feel less connected to. Since travelling is so easy these days, this map has almost nothing to do with actual physical distances, only personal attachments. I imagine many people could draw their own place-maps like this, provided that they have a centre, this one place that they can call home. If not, then their maps would probably look more like archipelagos, where all place-islands are more or less equal.

**You also at times seem to voice frustration at what is happening in Estonia, including people leaving the country. Is that an accurate observation on my part? It doesn't seem to be something many Estonian poets talk about.**

Yes, it is. What worries me, is that family ties are broken as a result. People lose each other. Time will pass and you will never be able to get it back. It's not just something that people experience in isolation. It affects the society as a whole.

But it's not just family ties that are lost – I think there are people in Estonia who have a well developed place memory. They have been living in the same place for generations, knowledge is passed on, it accumulates. When you move away, this knowledge will become lost and that intimate feeling of what and how a place is, vanishes. There is a well-known quote by Simone Weil, which says: "Being rooted is perhaps the most important and least recognized need of the human soul." Uprootedness is a difficult thing to experience. But what can you do, if for some reason you feel uprooted right here in our own home? How to reconnect yourself? How to feel at home in your own home?

It's a very difficult and emotional topic. But nothing could be worse for us than constantly thinking about the grass being greener on the other side and that Estonians are going to die out anyway – that's exactly the thing that deprives us of our life force here and now. I don't believe that the future is set. Anything can happen.

**What readers also find in you second collection are your translations of poet**

**William Carlos Williams. How did you start translating his work?**

I was familiar with his poetry for a few years, but started translating him almost by accident – I was procrastinating during an exam session and was just looking for other things to do. But then I got more and more into it and now I have quite a few of them. Williams is very observant of his surroundings, very tender towards people, objects and environments. He seems to have this healthy curiosity, which I found immensely attractive. At first glance, some of his poetry seems quite simplistic, but when you take a closer look, you realize he was acutely sensitive to language and poetic form.

**You have written prose as well as poetry, and have contributed to publications about Tartu, especially about the Karlova neighbourhood, of which I am also a fan. What is Tartu and Karlova to you?**

Tartu is that place in the world where where I feel most at home. I've lived in different parts of Karlova for the past 5-6 years, but now I've moved over to Tähtvere, which has a completely different feel. I nevertheless visit Karlova often. It's like a little microcosm, a town inside a town, very self-contained. A place full of little adventures and surprises. And Karlova sometimes has this very mysterious atmosphere, it feels almost as if it stands outside time – there is just this timeless place in an endless universe.

**You are also the editor of the literature section of *Müürileht*, a quarterly cultural newspaper. How did you get involved in that?**

I was offered that job by the former literary editor, of which I am very thankful. It has been an interesting experience, *Müürileht* seems to be ever evolving, there are many interesting and fresh ideas in the air all the time. The talented and critically minded people who work with us and read us have created a very inspiring atmosphere. I hope we have many exciting years to come.

**Thank you very much for the interview.**

# P o e t r y   b y   M a a r j a   P ä r t n a

by train

to travel five hours by train, to step out of the train, to map things out  
(with and without a map) – pure movement

to lose yourself in small details, in small matters, in coincidence and  
escaping; on strangers' faces, in sentences overheard by chance, in  
facades passed by, in the flowing Jugend composition; to read  
random signs, to speak a foreign language; to feel fresh, to feel tired

street musicians, the homeless, Scottish stag parties and German  
tourists – it's night and in front of the restaurant there's a pianist  
playing passionately and tenderly –

to be on a high point in the city, to be lifted out of a familiar space – a  
panoramic view that you can't get enough of – what we're used to  
seeing as towers and houses, exposes itself as a labyrinth, a scale  
model of roofs and streets miniatures; the old town in front of you,  
sleeping districts in the distance come into view, a lazy river cuts the  
city in two, the bridges split the river up

the afternoon is stifling, the light is intense, sharp, it doesn't arise, but  
rather radiates – from the streets, the glass windows of businesses:

we drive for hours along the river, one view is followed by another;  
over there is a port, industrial buildings, cranes, cargo ships, a  
factory; we head back

the late evening train is waiting, we travel through the night, through  
a silent landscape, back home, back where we started from

\*\*\*

night is contained inside all matter. when the day is over  
it grows out of the pith of the pear tree's thin branches,  
out from the young green leaves, from the very color green itself,  
in order to turn into a tree-shaped darkness.

we walk under the tall straight trees (this is a dream)  
when we speak, the words have an alien, shadowy ring to them,  
which is why we say very little.

when we stop and stand and turn to each other,  
I see the darkness crossing the contours of your face

and meeting the darkness that has taken the shape of a hand –  
they fuse together, it's night-time,  
the world has finished turning  
inside out.

\*\*\*

That's what the sounds are like  
as everyone gathers around the breakfast table:

the clatter of glasses and spoons, forks and dishes  
the buzz among the people, sounds from the kitchen  
the door being opened and closed  
the steps of those going past, the conversation at the table

that's what the colors are like:  
clothes glow in the soft light  
or fuse together with the walls  
the furniture throws long shadows  
the glance from across the table is contemplative, gray

that's what the words are like  
that is their warmth:

thanks  
you're welcome, come back soon

alright,  
see you later

\*\*\*

it's cool and windy between the houses in Užupis  
the trees are standing naked  
the last time I came here  
it was raining  
the outdoor café  
was still open  
the river wasn't frozen over yet

a young Miłosz wrote poems here in the 30s  
but that was before moving to Warsaw  
and the war  
and his years in exile

some of the houses look dilapidated  
the past has a way of making itself felt  
Užupis runs its own course  
and at the same time  
it feels us, and knows  
that we know how the grass  
is curling up on the steps that lead us  
down to the riverfront

we climb up the hill  
or ride the funicular to the tower  
we wish to find out  
what it's like  
to be one of those people down there on the street  
the city experiences itself  
through us  
we experience  
each other

upon leaving  
what remains are a few photos  
the lack of an explanation  
nostalgia

a memory

(Vilnius, January 2011)

the need to look back comes with the fact that something  
has gone missing, been erased, gotten lost  
the connection between the signifier and the signified  
has ceased to exist

that, which is between knowing and not knowing:  
the indefinite, unsure sense of existing  
without a clear shape or border, the fragile feeling  
of being half-asleep and half-awake...

when you contemplate it awake  
the empty spaces between letters become visible  
while sleep has a tendency  
to fill up the lacunae in the text

there's a place  
between what has been and what will be:

a word  
like a bridge  
crossing the gap between two opposite poles

Maarja Pärtla



# Andrei Hvostov's passion and misery

b y S i r j e O l e s k

In the course of twenty or so years, I have often had to talk about Estonian culture and literature to people of other nationalities (mainly Finnish). I finish a lecture or paper and wait for questions. I already know that in two-thirds of cases people will ask about the Russians living in Estonia. At first, I was a bit annoyed as I had, after all, been talking about Estonian culture. However, Russians were and still are intriguing, including Russians in Estonia. I have no idea whether this is good or bad. At first, I replied with what I knew for certain or thought I knew for certain. I come from the town of Jõhvi in north-eastern Estonia, I speak good Russian, I have Russian friends both in Estonia and in Russia, and I thought I knew what I was talking about. Still, I discovered that I was gradually becoming uncertain. In our country, we are used to the fact that there is a vast Russian minority here. For a long time, most of them constituted the Soviet-centred proletariat, who regarded Estonians as fascists. On the other hand, there have always been Russians who loathed the Soviet system just as much as Estonians: descendants of the White Russians or indigenous Russians who joined the Citizens' Committees in 1989, spoke fluent Estonian and had normal relations with their Estonian neighbours. During the

last twenty years, however, the mindset and attitudes of the Russian population in Estonia have undergone various changes and they no longer form two clear-cut groups. Instead, their views are all over the place and they express truly surprising opinions about Estonia and Estonians. On the whole, we live in different information spaces. I have no idea what someone I see in the street might be thinking. Even more – until the end of the Soviet Union, it was possible to distinguish a tourist, a Russian or an Estonian in the street, whereas now that no longer works. Heterogeneity within the Russian community, as with their attitude towards Estonians, has considerably increased in twenty years. Their inner, existential problems have perhaps been greater than those of Estonians: degenerating from the ruling national group into a minority within another nation cannot have been a painless process. They are all naturally keen to preserve their language and culture. How loyal will they be to the country that has enabled them to live here, largely without any interference? On the whole we do not know the answer, as Estonians have not, unfortunately, shown any great interest in them. It has simply been safer that way. Besides the rather alarming Bronze Night in 2007, when the Soviet war

monument was removed from central Tallinn to the Military Cemetery, the two communities have minded their own business and lived separate lives. We have different newspapers and TV channels, not too many mixed marriages and, in the interest of political correctness, which is on the increase here, acute ethnic issues are seldom discussed. Estonians are fascinated by the writer Andrei Ivanov, who writes in Russian, because his books reveal how intelligent Russians actually feel here. Ivanov's works have revealed a world of which Estonians did not have a clue. It seems that Russians do not feel that good here, even if they do not directly blame Estonians. The question probably lies in identity: who someone with Russian roots thinks he is in Estonia, and what his or her connections with the country and the Estonian Republic are. Here lies the difference between the two Andreis, because the other Andrei, the subject of this article, is, despite his name, an Estonian by disposition, having had his Sillamäe school and Tartu University education in Estonian, although he can be critical of the Estonian nationalists, as well as the Soviet power and the Russians who supported it.

In his book *The Passion of Sillamäe*, Hvostov writes about the issue of names, which immediately stigmatises people in Estonia. A Russian name in Estonian culture was a symbol for a long time. However, this has changed. Besides Andrei Hvostov, today's Estonian literary landscape is being shaped by Tiit Aleksejev and Vahur Afanasjev, of whom the latter claims to hardly speak Russian at all. When in the mid-1990s Hvostov began writing in Estonian for the influential *Eesti Ekspress*, he immediately attracted attention, first because of his name and then because of what he was saying. It took some time, but I dare say that we no longer associate Hvostov's name with the "Russian issue". This is possible only because Estonia is so small, and if someone often appears in the media we know or think

we know who this person is. For a long time, Hvostov was certainly one of the writers who led people to read *Ekspress* in the first place. In the newly re-independent Republic of Estonia, the mentality that tackled the interpretation of Estonianness was shaped by historians. Mart Laar, several times the prime minister, is a historian, born in 1961, as is Andrei Hvostov, born in 1963. However, the latter's articles differed from the mainstream conservative nationalism, and made readers think about others, including Russians. Sharp, quickly reacting, often with surprising views – this was and is Hvostov's style as a journalist. In 1999 he published the book *Mental Estonia*, essentially a lengthy essay about the roots of Estonianness and Estonia's relations with Europe. The issues Hvostov examined back then are again topical now, when a new set of people has published an academic history of Estonia about the very period where the main pillars of everything Estonian has been sought and found, i.e. the 13<sup>th</sup> century, the Chronicle of Henry of Livonia and the Christianisation of Estonia.

The reading public, however, was greatly taken aback when Hvostov published his first novel in 2004, *Crippled Achilles*. The clear focus in this thick book is the life of history students in a dormitory of Tartu University. The students seem to spend their time drinking, endlessly arguing about history, bantering and just talking drivel. A colleague from *Ekspress*, Heidit Kaio, wrote in 2011: "Impressions of university life form the foundation of his novel; several incidents and situations are familiar to students living in that dormitory. His friends from student days call this book a red brick and eagerly count the few who have managed to read it from cover to cover. Andrei himself admitted that he wanted to include everything he knew in one book." The novel, especially at the beginning, is confusing, but funny. I studied at Tartu too, and resided in another, slightly more decent dormitory just across the road. The milieu was thus familiar and I

quite happily read the whole book. Alas, it must be said that it is too long and a bit tedious at the end.

Why did a successful journalist suddenly write a novel? Probably because he wanted to be a “real” writer. It has not been easy for Hvostov; his two history-inspired plays, both published in 2006, are not very exciting works in which historical topics have been extensively tackled. However, his collection of short stories, *Foreign Tales*, made readers sit up and take notice. The story *The Blue Hills*, for example, which immediately connects with the Sinimäed (Blue Hills), a place in Estonia where in summer 1944 the Estonians and Germans resisted the onslaught of the Soviet army for weeks and months, thus making it possible for many Estonians to escape abroad. This was a forbidden topic during the Soviet period. In free Estonia, it was still ideologically uncomfortable, as writing about defence battles could bring about accusations of Estonians’ Nazi sympathies. Hvostov has always been politically incorrect and this is one attraction of his texts. In his main work so far, *The Passion of Sillamäe*, at the end he remarks that the country we are living in is nothing but “the Estonian Republic of Unsaid Things”.

Andrei Hvostov’s documentary tale about his childhood and younger years in Sillamäe was published in summer 2011. Estonian social media have produced endless discussions about it and the book has received official recognition as well: literary awards from the Cultural Endowment of Estonia and another from Viru County. While I was reading the book, I thought about the audiences at my lectures; here is the answer to your queries about Russians in Estonia: passionate and tendentious, but thorough and honest. Sillamäe was a closed town near the eastern border of Estonia, where I was able to go, despite living just 30 km west, only in 1991. Why this was so and what happened there is explained in the book. It was a place where the entire earlier time and history had been eliminated, a home to Russian-speaking immigrants, who were

perfectly satisfied with the general sense that they lived and worked in the Soviet Union. I remember the strange feeling when I finally visited: a nice seaside town, well-preserved pure Stalinist architecture, but not a single private residence! A “state town” amidst the otherwise quite normal countryside. It cannot have been easy to be an Estonian there. Why did the tiny minority of Estonians settle there in the first place? In Hvostov’s case, it was his family: his father, originally from Siberia, and his Estonian mother got work there, as well as a decent flat.

When I read the phrase “the Estonian Republic of Unsaid Things”, I remembered that in my time (I am nine years older than Hvostov) too, young people from Sillamäe came to Jõhvi, because there was no Estonian secondary school there. They arrived in the morning on the school bus and returned after school, but we never once asked about Sillamäe, why it was a closed town and what their parents did there. Why not? Because our parents had taught us not to ask questions? Hvostov admitted how little he knew about his parents’ past. My parents, too, began “talking” only after 1988: my father about his time in the German army and my Ingrian mother about how they were taken to Finland and back. There are many things I do not know, and it is now too late to ask, a typical situation in this country.

Hvostov’s Estonian mother had relatives near Rakvere and he was thus able to spend his summers in “real” Estonia. This expression shocked me deeply. Ten years earlier, in Jõhvi, I never once thought there might be another, “real” Estonia. True, we had lots of Russians in our town, but conflicts were rare. We had a big Estonian school and we felt totally at ease.

Hvostov’s relationship with his surroundings was/is much more passionate. “And I myself lived in a completely wrong country. And certainly in a totally wrong town.” Yes, Sillamäe was actually as revolting as in this book. The writer, however, is made of tough material. Choleric melancholic, as he



Andrei Hvostov (Photo by Scanpix)

described himself. In addition, he is a born dissident. "I could not join the organisation where everybody belonged," he explained about his refusal to become a Pioneer. He does not mention how his Russian father could have allowed this. Maybe he was in Siberia at the time. Or maybe he could not be bothered that much with his son, as in the book. Hvostov's habit of being extremely independent in his thinking has made him a fascinating journalist and writer. The image of the town of Sillamäe in the book becomes quite monstrous, a symbol of the all-destroying Soviet power. "All normal people wanted to escape from here. There must

have been something wrong with people who sincerely wished to stay. I don't know anyone who knew anyone who would not have wanted to leave," said Hvostov in a newspaper interview. And people did not just want to leave Sillamäe, but the whole of Soviet Estonia, including the "real" Estonia. The Soviet Union was a monstrosity, where children did not receive proper medical treatment, where the propaganda machine TV turned black into white, and where most people believed what they were told. Having served time in the Soviet army, Hvostov says that "this huge homeland of yours is inhabited by idiots."

In my opinion, Hvostov's Sillamäe book would be a useful manual for European communists. It will hopefully appear both in Finnish and in English, in which case Sofi Oksanen would not seem such an outlier in describing the regime, still difficult to comprehend in the West.

Hvostov is a very masculine writer, "a true man" according to some ancient ideas, a militaristic alpha-male. This is another topic with a lot of hypocrisy in Estonia, which Hvostov has luckily ignored. His descriptions of a young man's sexual frustrations and drinking are startlingly realistic. At the book launch, Hvostov said that the author had a choice of whether to be a good human being or a good writer. He has chosen the latter and his nearest and dearest are probably not exactly overjoyed about a few episodes in the book. At the same time, the honest and genuine approach is certainly an essential asset here.

Writers in Estonia cannot really survive on their writing alone. Hvostov tries to achieve this, hiding in the tranquillity of the Käsmu coastal village, and writing his next novel. The prominent Estonian prose writers Vilde and Tammsaare were also initially journalists, until reprints of their earlier work, the Cultural Endowment and translating work enabled them to devote themselves to literary pursuits. Hvostov, who turns 50 this year, has proved in *The Passion of Sillamäe* that he can write passionately, precisely, mercilessly and honestly. Whether this kind of text is documentary literature or fiction does not really matter.

# HeadRead

This year is a special one for the literature festival HeadRead – the readable feast takes place already for the fifth time. In late spring, from 29 May until 2 June, you can be a part of already well-known and loved events, but also enjoy some new programmes and guests.

The provisional list of foreign guests is a potent selection of exciting authors from various countries. The United Kingdom is represented by the science fiction writer Charlie Stross, historian Keith Lowe, actress and novelist Sarah Winman and poet and novelist John Burnside. The guest authors also include Maria Stepanova (Russia), Juha Vuorinen (Finland), Anders de la Motte (Sweden), Paolo Nori (Italy), Jennifer Johnston (Ireland), Andrey Hadanovich (Belarus), and visiting the festival for the second time, Sofi Oksanen (Finland), and our unofficial mascot Jason Goodwin (United Kingdom).

The Estonian programme features some traditional events like literary walks – this year in Nõmme (with Jaanus Vaiksoo and Wimberg), the Metsakalmistu cemetery (with Toomas Haug and Maarja Vaino) and around mediaeval Tallinn (with Indrek Hargla and Ott Sandrak). The festival's co-operation with the Estonian Children's Literature Centre, the Central Library of Tallinn and the café-cum-library Kapsad also continues. There is also the usual fare of engaging panels: a discussion of literature teachers, non-fiction and books about plants and herbs, and foreign publishers discussing the chances of small languages making it in the wider literary world.

There are more exciting events in store, which will appear in the complete programme on our website and our Facebook page.

<http://headread.ee/?lang=en>



Kristiina Ehin

**1001 Winters**, Kristiina Ehin's new collection of poetry in English translation, has been published in a bilingual edition by the well-known American poetry publisher **The Bitter Oleander Press**. It is Kristiina's ninth book in Ilmar Lehtpere's translation, a comprehensive volume of new and selected translations of her poetry, and the first to be published in the US. Poet and publisher Paul B. Roth observes that "These works arose from a richness in the earth. An earth composted with the ever-changing and often stagnant regimes overseeing Estonia's long, proud and storied past. But an earth that also brought forth the very basic of song into words that tell and retell the geography, the history and the culture from Estonia's bottomless oral tradition. These pieces not only come from this tradition but create for the young people in a new Estonia, a proud sense of wonder, opportunity and above all, freedom. It is especially refreshing

to read work that is so universal and never speaks over any one of us in its own very unique and compassionate way. One need not be Estonian to appreciate the wisdom these poems exude. One need only begin and be unable to stop."

**Kristiina's story "The Surrealist's Daughter", also in Ilmar Lehtpere's translation, appears in the prestigious anthology *Best European Fiction 2013* (Dalkey Archive Press).** A review of the book in the *Irish Times* says that "Kristiina Ehin's story is thrillingly chaotic from the get-go: a man attempts to woo a surrealist's enigmatic daughter, and she promptly turns into a stork. Amid the well-executed confusion, there is some terrific prose. The daughter works in a cabaret, where her job is "frying the hearts and other body parts of her male audience over a low flame".

# Short Outlines of Books by Estonian

by Brita Melts ,

Nikolai Baturin

## **Lendav hollandlanna**

(The Flying Dutchwoman)

Tallinn: Eesti Raamat, 2012. 142 pp.

ISBN 978-9985-65-931-1

Nikolai Baturin (b. 1936) is a singular phenomenon in Estonian literature, for at least three different reasons. Firstly, his style is easily recognisable because of his creative use of language – archaisms, dialect words and neologisms – and he enlivens his texts by using different print fonts. Secondly, his inventive language is supported by his limitless fantasy. Thirdly, Baturin is shamelessly romantic and full of pathos: features that are absolutely taboo in the modern and trend-conscious wing of Estonian prose.

Baturin's latest novel, *The Flying Dutchwoman*, is, in this sense, typical; but instead of different print fonts, fragments of musical notation from Wagner's opera *The Flying Dutchman* are inserted into the text. This book is in several ways related to Baturin's three previous novels of similar rich fantasy: *The Centaur* (2003), *The Way of the Dolphins* (2009) and *A Fern in the Stone* (2006). All of these novels are playgrounds of elements, their plots move on the sea, in a desert, on imaginary beaches or oil fields of an unidentified future, and among his characters there are mortals as well as heroes of mythical background. Characteristically to Baturin's works, the protagonist of *The Flying Dutchwoman* is the author's mythical *alter ego*, the ship's secretary Nikodemus of Parnassos.

*The Flying Dutchwoman* lacks a continuous plot. The book consists of five episodes, forming a whole in which the protagonist's journey hints at the motif of Odysseus. A seaman who has survived a shipwreck happens to come to a land of tobacco growers, from where it is impossible to escape. However, he manages to swim to the open sea, where he is picked up by a cursed ship whose crew consists of a woman captain, a strange Ethiopian and 600



Nikolai Baturin (Photo by Seampix)

# Authors

R u t t H i n r i k u s a n d J a n i k a K r o n b e r g

bodiless women sailors. The chapter *The Flying Dutchwoman 1843* explains how Wagner got the idea of creating an opera about the ghost ship. The 'Dutchwoman' of the novel is a woman captain, whose other roles include a teacher of Muslims, a black defender with only one arm, and a black physician with only one arm, who is finally executed. At the end of the novel, a storm brings to shore a shabby sailor, who tells the story to his wife and a boy who is, supposedly, his son. The man dies, but returns to his wife as a butterfly.

In this novel, the ship is a symbol of the whole world. The ship and its crew sail the seas, win Blue Ribbons that gradually take on a red hue, rob ocean liners and take over freighter caravans, pillage shores, burn castles and demand ransom money. But, while it is possible to stop a ship, is it also possible to stop the world, which "sped under its purple sails, its black masts bending, following its either damned or blessed course into the unknown..."? The author does not answer this question, and the open-ended warning, presented not in the customary science fiction style but in a majestic style created and fed by ancient mythology, remains.

In one episode of the novel, voices talk to Wagner, saying, "The composer has been overwhelmed by a craze of symbols and a mania of metaphors!" and the reply is, "It is true. But without them, it would have been possible to build only cellars, not cathedrals." The same could be said of the author, who has created the grandiose spectacles of *The Flying Dutchwoman*. JK

Meelis Friedenthal

## Mesilased

(The Bees)

Tallinn, Varrak, 2012. 211 pp.

ISBN: 9789985324660

Up to the present, literary visions of Tartu University have centred on the brief university studies in 1819-1820 of Kristjan Jaak Peterson, who has been called the first Estonian poet. Now, we have a novel about Tartu and Tartu University in the late 17th century and, besides its subject, this novel is noteworthy for its mastery of language as well. *The Bees* is Meelis Friedenthal's (b. 1973) second novel. Friedenthal is no literary novice – he debuted with the sci-fi novel *Golden Era* in 2005 and has since published other texts in the genre.

Friedenthal, a theologian by education, discovered a moral-philosophical treatise about the medieval concepts of vision in the Tallinn City Archive. He based his doctoral dissertation (2008) on this treatise, but as he could not express all his ideas on the subject in the dissertation and needed an additional outlet, he wrote a novel.

His protagonist is a student, Laurentius Hylas, who comes from Leiden to study at Tartu University. He has already earned his BA and wants to go further. We first see him arriving on a stagecoach, looking for lodgings, taking his matriculation exam with Professor Sven Dimberg, and then walking around Tartu to get a general idea of the place. The action of the novel takes one week; the book is well composed and its atmosphere is believable and sensorially rich. It rains incessantly, Laurentius is continually bothered by a specific stench, there is an overall damp dimness in the air, and fever lashes at his imagination. There is something magical, sick, dirty and even repellent in the air. The crops have failed and famine is causing people to have visions; death is commonplace, and the local people are full of superstitions.

With a little imagination, we can see the Tartu of the 17th century rolling past us like a film; we can truly see the coach, the parrot cage that is stolen from Laurentius, a miserable old man who wakes up on a dissecting table, and mysterious Clodia. The rationalism of learned men defines many things in a way different than ours. At that time, everybody knew that melancholy was caused by black bile. We meet several historical figures: the professor of mathematics Dimberg and professor of philosophy Sjöbergh, as well as Rector Jakob Friedrich Below, who allows us to date the novel to the year 1696.

As the author intends, not all puzzles and mysteries find their answers in the book. However, the reader is not left in this confusing and mysterious era without any clues. The novel ends with the author's notes, which explain to some extent the

understandings and notions of the 17th century about the world and the soul, the eyes and vision, diseases and witchcraft, and about how people were able to believe in all these things. Some critics have praised only this short final chapter; others believe that, all in all, this is the best book of the year. But even those who prefer some other work agree that 2012 had a very good crop of novels and that the position of *The Bees* cannot be underestimated. RH

Jan Kaus

## Koju

(Home)

Tallinn, Tuum, 2012. 208 pp

ISBN: 9789949918676

Jan Kaus (b. 1971) is one of the most remarkably creative members of his generation. He is a universal intellectual, a Renaissance man, not only a prose writer, poet, translator and critic, but also a musician in a band and even an artist. He is one of the few Estonian writers who is able to support himself with his writing, meaning that he has to write a lot and quickly, and manage to do all kinds of other things. Kaus has been the Chairman of the Estonian Writers' Union; he has been an editor and a host of literary events, etc. He is the author of several novels and collections of poetry and short stories.

*Home* is Kaus's fourth novel and, according to critics, his best one. As with its predecessors, this is a short novel. We could even ask whether *Home* is truly a novel,

Jan Kaus (Photo by Scanpix)



because it actually consists of three separate stories – slices of the lives of three men: a writer, an artist and an image counsellor. The stories are separate from each other, but they take place in the same space-time, overlapping at some points and intensifying each other in their similarity. The three men differ from each other only in their names and their experience, and in their partners, who mysteriously just slip past us/ them. However, everybody wants to hold on to somebody.

Differing from modern prose, very often overwhelmed by loss and deprivation, Kaus's new novel anticipates the fulfilment of expectations and expresses a passive yearning for something. His heroes need to experience their existence to the fullest; often, they look for it in their reflections in their partners. When, in the first story, Rasmus thinks about his wife Epp, he is not sad about their separation because they had already grown apart. But his new relationships remain fleeting and casual and he can only ask what the use of right moments is if you recognise them only when they have already passed. In contrast, it is Rasmus's eccentric brother who suddenly wakes up to reality and starts to organise his life. Maybe in order to recognise the right moment, one has to be slightly different ...

In his interview for the newspaper *Eesti Päevaleht*, Jan Kaus said, "Defencelessness, essential human uncertainty and insecurity before life has, almost unintentionally, acquired a socio-political meaning. It seems to me that society is full of excessive self-confidence." Kaus thinks that it is impossible to avoid the complexity of life. His style has become more and more expressive, his wording exact, the moods almost palpable. Kaus's language is held in check: he does not use the low style and robust phrasing characteristic to forceful best-sellers. The angst, challenges of the time and other problems can be discussed without smashing in doors. Kaus prefers hints and allusions that point to the fragility and mystery of being. Thus, his heroes do

not even know what they are actually waiting for, or "whether it is better when the ship glides soundlessly out of the harbour, or when it glides into the harbour. Home." RH

Kätlin Kaldmaa

## Armastuse tähestik

(The Alphabet of Love)

Tallinn: NyNorden, 2012. 76 pp

ISBN: 97899499919321

In the mid-1990s, a young poet published her first collection of poems, *Larii-laree* (1996), under the alias Kätlin Kätlin. After a pause of a dozen years, Kätlin Kätlin published her second poetry collection, *Üks pole ühtegi* (*One Is Nothing*) (2008). Now, the poet has given up her alias; last year, Kätlin Kaldmaa (b.1970), a well-known translator and literary critic, published her fourth collection of poetry, *The Alphabet of Love*. Returning to the poetry landscape

Kätlin Kaldmaa (Photo by Scanpix)



after years of silence, Kaldmaa's poetry has changed noticeably. In her earlier years she engaged in perhaps even too vigorous games with language and experiments with form, and built a "defensive wall of words" of baroque free verse. Now, her form of expression is intentionally down-to-earth, simple and free, and the language of her poems is sharp and precise, without poetic swelling – it has even been called the "uninteresting language of women's magazines". Kaldmaa as a poet has greatly benefited from such changes in style: *The Alphabet of Love* is a remarkably integrated and well-composed collection, displaying clear thinking and vigorous and intense wording.

The subject of her poetry is attractive in itself. Kaldmaa continues her focus on human relations, remembered from her earlier works, but she narrows them down to love relationships. This really is a book about love, telling us how even small things and trifles can be translated into the language of love, while avoiding excessive emotionality. From her earlier inner visions, she has graduated to an important (vertical) expansion and she casts a rational and even ordinary, but extremely clear and intense, sidelong glance at strictly personal aspects. She depicts love in a conceptual and distanced way, but distanced in its good sense due to a multitude of small and fine points that are noticed and mentioned, channelling love outward, into the surrounding environment. Even more than the alphabet of love, this book is about the geography of love (this is also the title of one poem) and about a journey towards changes and discoveries within and without the self. This journey does not trigger an exalted avalanche of personal emotions; the love depicted here is simple, habitual and may perhaps even be dull to more passionate souls: "and I want to hold you in the midst of all crazes and madnesses of the world. and I want you to take me as I am, a workaholic

and always somewhere else, and that you were here when I returned, and waited for me and gave me a call and asked when I would come, and whether I wanted something to eat when I arrived. and I want the dullest life in the world, to go to bed at one and the same time and to wake up at one and the same time."

Love is described as an ordinary thing, and the depth of emotions and commitment are expressed in a roundabout way, by silences, not by simplifying words. We can see masterful poesy behind the words: the poet falls silent at just the right moment, as if teasing readers. The love of *The Alphabet of Love* reaches its readers mostly from outside, spatially, and from people, not from the soul and the heart. This is a thrilling and purposefully applied method. In many cases, the paths of love are shown as parts of true landscapes and dreamlike "lovers" enter the game (yes, this is a game!), coming from Afghanistan, Bosnia, Canada, Iceland, Switzerland ... There is even "my European lover", who "comes/ from Syria and Turkey, Morocco and Tunisia,/ Egypt and Indonesia, Serbia and Iraq./ he has no past to talk about,/ his home is there where he is living right now." Most of the geographical areas mentioned in the poems are exotic, and the talk is primarily about dangers, conflicts or even about restricting one's freedom, not about the romanticism that is customarily associated with love. Such a selection of words and themes, pointing out the scope of the poet's vision, adds a very quiet and wordless tension to the seemingly simple love, raising it above individual sentiments. However, the book is still an extremely intimate, sensitive and existential collection of poems about social and landscaped paths of love. When coming across these paths, some obvious and deeply private matters need to lie behind the words, to be discovered slowly and silently. BM

Mart Kivastik  
**Vietnami retsept**

(Vietnam Recipe)

Tartu: Väike Öömuusika, 2012. 285 pp.

ISBN 978-9949-30-671-8

Mart Kivastik's (b. 1963) book *Vietnam Recipe* recently received the annual travel writing award issued by the publishing house and travel agency Go. However, the first thing that comes to mind when you read the book is René Magritte's picture depicting a pipe entitled "This is not a pipe" – *Ceci n'est pas une pipe*. Because this is not your usual travelogue. It can also be read as a novel. The features of both genres are equally represented. The reader finds a personal development story, or at least a significant fragment of one, compressed into a brief period of time, as well as a road-story within

a specific geographical space. The latter, i.e. travel writing, still seems to be primary, largely because of the sinuous map of Vietnam on the Indo-China Peninsula on the back cover of the book, showing the most important towns and places. This is a considerable help for readers, which is often missing in traditional travelogues.

*Vietnam Recipe* is the most substantial prose work by the acclaimed short story writer and playwright, who is frequently inspired by our cultural history. The story itself is fairly simple: the protagonist Toomas Sven Andersen, called Boy, gets to know a young girl called Mari on Facebook, and they decide to meet up in Vietnam, in order to travel the country as backpackers from north to south. The biology student Mari quickly adapts to Vietnam, whereas Boy constantly yearns for the Eurosport TV channel and his journey through Vietnam becomes a journey into himself. In other words, this is a kind of initiation, getting rid of his father's influence and becoming a man – one of the central motifs in Kivastik's prose overall. The journey starts in cool Hanoi and ends in Saigon; on the way, the characters fall out and Boy travels from Nha Trang southwards on a motorbike belonging to the one-man Vietnamese travel agency Dong and Dong Easy Riders Tour. However, the book does not present the journey as a smooth plot, but as two stories taking place simultaneously. After the young people split up, Kivastik cuts the story into pieces and puts it back together again, presenting alternate stages of each journey. Arriving in Saigon for the New Year festivities, Boy suddenly realises that he has only two friends in that country: the motorbike driver Dong and the girl left behind in Nha Trang. He manages to convince the driver to turn back – Boy finally understands what he wants and sets out to find the girl. Here the novel ends.

Kivastik's style is, as always, colloquial and fluent, and the book reads easily. The exotic and alien environment make a perfect



Mart Kivastik (Photo by Ohlertti)

background to Boy's journey into himself. The first sexual experience, the colourful world of Asia and the unexpectedly piquant environment for the pampered European create superbly fitting associations. The book is full of incidents describing curious cultural differences. The word recipe can be interpreted in a gastronomic sense, as well as evoking spiritual balance. The book is therefore an excellent introduction to travelling in the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. JK

Tõnu Õnnepalu

### **Kuidas on elada**

(How Does It Feel to Live)  
Tallinn: Varrak, 2012. 98 pp  
ISBN 9789985326305

### **Mandala**

Tallinn: Varrak, 2012. 244 pp  
ISBN 9789985325933

In 2009, Tõnu Õnnepalu (b.1962) published, within a short period of time, two books that entered into a dialogue with each other: the poetic diary *Spring and Summer and*, and the book of prose *Paradise*. In 2012, on the eve of his 50th birthday, he published first a novel entitled *Mandala* and then seemingly its sequel, the poetic diary *How Does it Feel to Live*. All four of these books complement each other and they are strongly interconnected by their locations: the silent woods of central Estonia, or a windy island on the Baltic Sea.

*Paradise* was an emotional re-creation of a place of great personal importance for Õnnepalu on the island of Hiiumaa, together with all its people and history. *Mandala* documents a place deep in the woods of mainland Estonia, its recent past and the changes that the protagonist of the book – an anonymous writer – has experienced

during the time spent there. This time, the location is not so close to the writer; it is not the location of his past private distresses and joys, because the time spent there does not include the impressionable age described in *Paradise*. *Mandala* is actually a quite unpretentious novel, where seemingly nothing happens and Õnnepalu does not share with readers any of the unconditionally private and tender moments we have by now grown used to reading about in his books. There are almost no characters in the book besides the writer, who has moved into a yellow house, and his cats, whom he reflectively observes and who become interesting mirrors of human life.

There are also a few people living in the neighbourhood whom the writer now and then meets or who play some role in the village life, and there's the nephew of the writer, who comes to visit him. *Mandala*



Tõnu Õnnepalu (Photo by Scarpix)

lacks intrigue and a clear plot, it has no novel-like structure and it is, seemingly, dominated by a profound mood of *laissez faire*; this is simply a quiet observation of everyday life. But still, it is last year's best-selling book of Estonian literature! Consequently, Õnnepalu's sentences must hide some attractive philosophy and his "external journey is the reflection of an inner one". Indeed, every word of the book expresses powerfully generalised sensations, conditions and contemplations. This is a book about human solitude and silence that is in concord with the writer's soul. Perhaps this is why we recognise Õnnepalu's world: he shows us the life of common people with their everyday problems and thoughts, where simple and more complicated moments have been subtly intertwined. The book expresses a refined journey in search of happiness and peace. The collection of poetry expresses it: "The peace that I have been searching for, / has always been this one, / not the one that I've been searching for. / The one that is for me, not the other one, / not somebody else." That's it.

At the end of *Mandala*, the writer, who has become even more withdrawn from the world, again goes across the sea to the island described in *Paradise*, together with his cats. About his life there, spent in the quiet flow of days, observing and enjoying nature, we can read in the collection of poems *How Does It Feel to Live*. Õnnepalu's seventh poetry collection is like a diary of things happening outdoors, starting with warm spring nights in May and ending with the melting of winter frosts. The wheel of nature makes a full turn. In *Mandala*, and even more in his poetry, Õnnepalu writes about time. He expresses in words his impressions of the surrounding nature and the present of the moment of writing, and records the momentary impressions that change his state of mind. The poems are remarkably sensual: "The fragrance of

woods in a warm wind", the clatter of stones catching his attention, the attractive smell of spring and early summer seem to be entirely new, and new sounds give a new meaning to everyday life. "The time has suddenly come, / When you notice how many different colours can be seen in grey." The whole collection involves a search for peace and the wisdom that a person finds somewhere in a solitary place, surrounded by nature. And ultimately, the continuous solitude can also express some warmth or even lightness of being. The last verses of the collection read, "It is autumn. / You breathe: it is life." BM

Kaur Riismaa

## **Rebase matmine**

Burial of the Fox

Tallinn: Nao Kirik, 2012. 111 pp

ISBN: 9789949917280

A collection of poetry with the long and formal title *Our Mornings, Our Days, Evenings, Nights* was published a few years ago. This book was very favourably received due to its original and unusual style. The author of the book, the young poet Kaur Riismaa (b. 1986), does not showcase himself by writing about his own inner battles and emotions, nor does he write the social-critical poetry that was popular a few years ago. In his debut collection *Our Mornings, Our Days, Evenings, Nights*, Riismaa invents life stories. His poems tell us about fictional people from their own viewpoints, or we can say that Riismaa has transformed his mind into an alien, but a much more experienced and more emphatic viewpoint, and his poetry looks like a set of role plays. (We know that, besides writing poetry, Riismaa is an actor and a playwright and so is also engaged in role plays.) In his debut collection, his roles are mostly historical, coming from the first half of the 19th century. The poet has

undertaken a historical journey and his work sheds light on collective memory, just as the living classic Mats Traat has been doing for about a half of a century, with his Harala life-stories in a poetic form, dealing with Estonian history and the fate of the (country) people. Moreover, Riismaa's epic poetry, concerned with history, has been compared to the works of the great prose authors Ene Mihkelson and Jaan Kross.

In Riismaa's second collection of poetry, *Burial of the Fox*, role play has seemingly stopped, and his lyrical self does not transform into other people all the time. Perspectives are still spectacularly changed, but in a new way: the mostly first-person voice in his poems talks about "I", "you" and "he/she", and then changes suddenly and voices a collective point of view of "we", "you" and "they"; six parts of the book are titled with just these personal pronouns. Thus the poet Riismaa does not personally

reveal himself; we cannot specify the voice of the author or his lyrical self, because the self-position shown in the poems is not always rendered with the same voice.

Thus, in his second collection of poetry Riismaa is still convincingly carrying on his role playing. He has narrowed his themes and his poetry has become more personal, as the role-playful aiming at objectivity allows us to see. His main stress is not on the collective psychology-based feeling of communion with all people; he does not strive to examine the whole course of lives, but concentrates on immediate relations between people, psychological conditions, emotions and the question of nearness-loneliness. All statements are accompanied by a tremendous wish to understand and empathise, and there is a wide psychological scope that does not allow any single emotion or state of mind to dominate, or any problem (either a social problem or a problem of human relations) to overshadow anything. "I would want to tell you/ do not cry/ let it be/ look/ there are so many beautiful things/ there are still so many beautiful things/ in our lives". In *Burial of the Fox*, even the depictions of time and the environment differ from earlier ones: they are smaller in scale and recognisably more modern; his poems follow with immediacy the flow of moments and changes in a state of mind, and render them visual.

As a poet, Riismaa is able to create a convincing and universal image of a spiritually complete, broad-minded and colourful individual. He is so skilful that his poetry world contains no heaviness, although it does not lack sadness and loneliness. Riismaa's texts have a kind of special poetic lightness that makes them simply good to read: "A poem is like a weather forecast./ The more accurate it is,/ the happier we are/ expecting a good day,/ the more accurate it is,/ the sadder we are,/ thinking about a new dark day." BM

Kaur Riismaa (Photo by Scampix)



Urmas Vadi

## Tagasi Eestisse

(Back to Estonia)

Saarde-Pärnu: Jumalikud Ilmutused, 2012.  
279 pp. ISBN 9789949931125

Urmas Vadi (b. 1977) is one of the most thrilling contemporary authors of Estonian literature, and is almost a phenomenon. Without hesitation, he can be called a “multi-talent”. He is known as an author of short stories and plays, but also as a scriptwriter, a radio voice and lately more and more as a producer. Vadi had already written in several genres, but he tried out the genre of the novel only in 2010, when he presented one of his prose works, *Letters to Aunt Anne*, as his first novel. Actually, the genre of the book was unclear: it was a testimony of his inquiries into the form and process of writing a novel, and a reflection on his intentions. Vadi’s new book, *Back to Estonia*, is without doubt a true novel, but it still is, characteristically to Vadi, a kind of an innovative artistic effort. *Back to Estonia* is not a simple and traditional novel, but a novel within a novel – a perfect example of metafiction – and it is extraordinary because of the pranks and puns (including three monkeys who follow the plot!) that are used to accompany and connect the two (or more) planes of the text, because of the author’s games with fictionality and documentality, and because of its unique ending.

At first glance, the story seems to be rather simple. The narrator, called Urmas Vadi, writes about the life of the protagonist John (or Juhan), describing his work and breaking points in his life, his depression, *idée fixes* and fantasies, which finally take him to Australia, a trip initiated by a job John has been offered and which introduces still another story into his life – a novel about the post-WWII Forest Brethren in Estonia, written by an Estonian exile author. With this fictional novel, read by John, Vadi gives quite a ghastly overview of the most tragic period of the Estonian history of the 20th century,

spiced with overflowing national patriotism. But all this is rendered with such a thick daub of the grotesque that it ultimately feels like a parody and is, probably consciously, made to be reminiscent of Andrus Kivirähk’s *The Man Who Spoke Snakish*. On the other hand, this weird national-romanticist story is framed by the present-day life of the bored John, with all its twists and turns, where fantasy suddenly grabs the reins. Vadi’s novel becomes a brilliant literary game, with reality and the fictional culminating on the last pages of the book, where the whole novel is suddenly shown in an entirely new light.

In the midst of playing with all kinds of fantasies, Vadi presents a multifaceted narrative that can be examined and analysed in a number of ways. At first, it seems that *Back to Estonia* is, in a sense, a travel book, because the trip to Australia, and the meetings and events the protagonist experiences there are written in a realistic way, despite the fact that at the end of the book we can see that the trip had been taken only in his imagination. Then it becomes clear that this is certainly a novel about identity, as the protagonist John is seeking, after the “death” of his father, some new turns in his life to escape his daily routine. Thirdly, Vadi examines the different forms of exile: the enforced exile during the Soviet occupation and the “new exile”, popular among the young people of today who wish to have adventures and travel and see the world. And lastly, the novel poses questions about the existential angst-related psychological state called “internal exile”. All these paths are connected by a question looming in the background about Estonianness: who is, actually, a true Estonian? Is it a person who is idealistic and patriotic to the limit, or is it a person who peacefully lives his quiet daily life? The author himself does not offer any opinions and leaves a great deal of space, both noble and ironic, for the reader’s interpretations. BM

Toomas Vint

## **Openly about Marriage**

Tallinn: Tulikiri, 2012. 232 pp.

ISBN 978-9949-9362-0-5

*Openly about Marriage* is the 22<sup>nd</sup> book by the productive prose writer and artist Toomas Vint (1944). The idea for this novel came from his participation in a TV programme about long-lasting happy marriages. Vint makes no secret that the novel is somewhat of a documentary, using stories from real life, specific events, art exhibition press releases and Internet comments. Although the book tackles mundane or even banal themes, such as happiness in marriage, alcoholism, infidelity and secrets of a long marriage, Vint has skilfully created an enjoyable and fascinating whole.

The protagonists of the novel are Voldemar, a writer, and his wife Vivian, who is an artist. Their views are presented alternately, occasionally overlapping, so that the reader experiences different reactions to the same events. When the husband gets a call inviting them both to a hugely popular TV show, the wife initially firmly refuses, but the husband decides to accept the challenge, mainly thinking about the people who read and buy his books. He is a rational and structured operator, whereas the woman is emotional and impulsive. However, when the programme airs, the wife retells episodes from his books, which the audience takes for real. The characters' frequent flash-backs and inner monologues reveal that the man used to be an unfaithful alcoholic, and now everything forgotten and forgiven is being lugged out into the open again in an artistically exaggerated form. The gossip-hungry media descend upon the couple. The viewers react furiously and bitingly, accusing the man and wife of all manner of debauchery.

The novel thus describes the fate of an intellectual, a creative person in today's media society in general, where appearance and staying in the limelight are more important than reality. It seems pretty hopeless to keep any balance on that appearance-reality axis, especially when the public is just as gullible as the creator who naively tries to outsmart the media. Vint also points out the ease with which the public can be manipulated, but does not over-dramatise his work: we can see the end of the novel as happy, because the married couple continues their long-lasting life together and the man, who emerged from alcoholism years ago, does not open the bottle in the final scene.

Vint's description is precise and sensitive; psychological details and what is observed with an artist's eye are expressed in a rather neutral style, with occasional comic nuances. Besides the plot, which involves a short period of time in the present, we get an overview of the characters' development during the Soviet past, when eroticism and sex were taboo topics, but the artists still lived a bohemian life. In addition, Vint as a polemicist also tackles topical themes in the art world, and the opposite understandings of art of different generations, and he shows the end of an era in the emergence of e-books. Conflict for Vint is a source for creative work or, as his protagonist says: "A writer must not live in harmony with the world, or he will have nothing to write about. Good literature grows out of the dung heap of painful disharmonies." JK

Maarja Kangro  
**Dantelik auk**

(Dante-like Hole)

Tallinn, Eesti Keele Sihtasutus. 2012.

140 pp, ISBN: 9789985795064

Maarja Kangro (b. 1973) has firmly secured herself a place in the foreground of Estonian women's literature. Actually, the number of critics who accord her that place is continuously growing. Kangro debuted with a collection of poetry in 2006. She is the author of four collections of poetry and two short story collections; she has twice earned the annual poetry award, once the annual prose award and, in addition to these, she has won the Friedebert Tuglas Short Story Award. *Dante-like Hole* is her second collection of short stories, containing seven texts.

The first two stories – the title story and the next one, *Lobster for Two* – are the most memorable ones. When read one

after the other, they almost form one united story. In the first, a couple spends time in Iceland and, in the second, a couple is in Slovenia. There are relationships already beginning to tear apart, and there are precisely worded dialogues, questions asked in passing: What do you want of your life? What or who do you want to be when you're 46? If such really serious and important questions do not sound hollow in the text, we know that we have laid our hands on a book of a good or even very good author.

Maarja Kangro's text is about bodily sensations, touches and pleasures (there is a lot of talk about eating in this book as well) that set the mood. The author knows that the best texts are born of one's own experiences, of things one has touched, tasted and bitten into, and felt under one's skin. With all this, a certain violence against one's past feelings and a





Mihkel Kaevats (Photo by Scampix)

certain mercilessness towards oneself are unavoidable. Kangro does not write about anything extraordinary: always, there are two people, there are feelings and past passions, unexpected encounters with banality or, in contrast, a tender and hopeless yearning for something more real can be found behind a trivial cliché. Her stories can be characterised by the word pairs 'witty and ironic', and 'merciless and sensitive'. If such pairs of words seem to apply, then the stories characterised by these words must be paradoxical in some way. Indeed, the situations she depicts may make us laugh, especially when the characters of the stories are dead serious or fuming in rage. Kangro has talked about the tragedy of life and said that the coexistence of violence and sympathy in human beings is a subject that needs constant attention. RH

Mihkel Kaevats

## **Ungari kirsid & teisi luuletusi**

(Hungarian Cherries and Other Poems)

Tallinn: Pegasus, 2012. 80 pp.

ISBN 9789949472956

*Hungarian Cherries and other Poems* is the fourth collection by the young poet, translator and essayist Mihkel Kaevats (b. 1983). Among other things, he has organised various protest actions, acting as the voice of his generation and youthful idealism, and his social energy is also, to a certain extent, evident in his poems, but only to a certain extent. His poetry in this collection is descriptive and highly visual, resembling diary-like pictures of everyday life surrounding the poet: his work, people, places and journeys. However, all the depicted urban scenes or landscapes are quite sensual; simple mundane existence is revealed through sensual landscapes. Here we encounter the lyrical Kaevats, familiar from his previous work, who displays tenderness and a soft tone, rather unusual for a male poet, strangely

captivating poetry of melancholy beauty, which on several occasions is twisted by means of cultural quotations.

Kaevats has said that “in the end, poetry is an art of imagination and the meanings and openings should be found in the world of images”. As a poet, he seems to be a lyrical and playful vagabond, who through his writing records tiny moments of today as poetic pictures or even imaginary “recollections”, although besides geographical motifs or real nature poetry, this particular vagabond expresses himself mainly in sensual-emotional poetry. The lyrical self of Kaevats seeks, dreams and encounters love, is afraid of loneliness and yearns to share his experiences, even the simplest of moments: “What was it I wanted to say: // life’s exhausting vastness / grandiosely in any given moment.” This is, after all, a poet’s wealth, reacting to “any given moment” and recording those moments in order to share them, capturing them in words: “unique presence of days, the feeling that / this very touch of life can never be found again.” The main theme of Kaevats’s previous collections was love, both physical and metaphysical, both as daydreaming and erotic description, whereas here, in his fourth book, there is less eroticism, and passions are presented in a more reserved manner. Sensations and perceptions have expanded, set in correlation with the environment; there is more “something in between / impulses, pictures and the state of being”, which oscillates on the boundaries of everyday practices, “remembering dreams”, intimate thoughts, aesthetic experience and gentle idealism. It is clear that Kaevats is keen on life’s brightness and alertness, novelty and uniqueness in the world’s mundane nature, depth and doubts about meanings, but also gloomy aspects, and hence the diversity of his poetry. Expressing himself in a remarkably figurative, occasionally gently bilious style, Kaevats has mastered the art of poetry in a pure and sublime tone, charmingly revealing a voice of the younger generation. BM

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