

# Elm

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# 2014



# Elm

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Mari Saat (Photo by Scanpix)

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# Looking for transparency

Interview with **Mari Saat**, by **Virág Márkus**

Tallinn, May 2014, Nordic springtime at its best. The lilacs are about to bloom when I finally gather my courage and ring the doorbell of one of Estonia's most interesting and talented prose writers: Mari Saat. I first discovered her in 2009 through her novel *Lasnamäe Lunastaja*. Having started my Estonian studies relatively late, I struggled somewhat with the text at the beginning, but despite the linguistic barriers I just couldn't put down this book. Years have passed but the nagging feeling that this text deserves more has not left me. After becoming a more confident Estonian speaker and reader, I took the book in my hands again and savoured it word by word. Carried away by the density and the richness of the text I realised that meeting the author in person was no longer a question of if, but when. The conversation was an important experience for the enthusiastic Estophile that I am. Mari Saat welcomed me on the doorstep of her home, Köler 14, a house where so many writers have found a home. Then, in the interest of a peaceful talk, she guided me to Viivi Luik's neighbouring apartment, where in the absence of the residents, accompanied by a cup of tea, we spent hours talking about history, literature, translation and some of the most burning questions of contemporary Estonia. The conversation went on until dusk and was only disturbed by the horns of ferries on the Gulf of Finland.

**Virág Márkus: You are not a philologist by trade, and your field is pretty much the opposite of anything related to literature, since you are teaching business ethics at Tallinn University of Technology. Considering that, it would be especially fascinating to know where your interest in literary expression originates from.**

Mari Saat: My mother read to me a lot as a child and my aunt from Hiiumaa Island told me many, many stories: ghost stories and old stories about the island. When the family was on Hiiumaa the women would usually knit at dusk. Since they had roots in the local villages, they had this old habit of not putting the light on. When there was too little light for reading or other activities, there was always knitting before it got really dark. So they would knit and tell tales and I would listen. My aunt also read us bedtime stories in the evening: we just wouldn't go to sleep without a bedtime story. I had listened to a lot of stories before I learned how to read and later, once I knew the alphabet, I started devouring books, everything I could get my hands on at home.

**How old were you, when you learned to read?**

Oh, I was very old (*laughs*). I was seven. Basically, I don't think that my interest in literature was somehow *generated*. It seems to me that people are born with a certain aim in life or a given profession. In my childhood, long ago, when I couldn't read yet, I already had this feeling that I would become a writer and it wasn't a good feeling at all. I somehow didn't have respect for this vocation. I was intimidated by it. We had an acquaintance who occasionally dropped by at our place to ask for money and he was, how to put it, deeply obsessed with alcohol. He was of course a writer and a bad example for me. Besides, Juhan Liiv, the person whose poems I so much adore, was diagnosed with schizophrenia, which is perhaps even less motivating for a child. Drunkard or madman. To put it briefly, I did not have the slightest respect for this profession.

My mother was extremely worried about us and our future. She had two writer friends: Debora Vaarandi and Aadu Hint. Aadu told my mother that she should make sure that her children learned a *proper* profession, a warning that my mother often repeated later, so I kept quiet about my shady plans.

**How did you finally pick this “disturbing” profession of writer?**

I continued reading literature at university, especially writers of the first Republic of Estonia, but when I got to Soviet Estonian literature, despite the fact that there were all those wonderful writers, such as Mati Unt and Valton, I always had the impression that there was something constructed in the texts, an element that I found alienating. I thought that I could do better, that I would write differently. But what right does one have to claim this or even think this way, if one hasn't even tried? So I decided to learn how to write, how to write something that would be worth publishing. I took my first few stories to the literary magazine *Noorus*, where the reaction was instant rejection. Finding the right form of expression was like solving a crossword puzzle. It took me quite a few years to publish anything readable and the process still hasn't come to an end. Images have helped me to find my language: I describe pictures as clearly as I can and I correct a lot. I cross out so much that in the end there is often nothing *left but the skeleton of the story*.

**Does the fact that you are active in such a different walk of life as economics inspire you or help you in your work as a writer?**

No, not at all; quite the contrary: it disturbs my writing. Particularly nowadays, when I have less energy and no longer feel like working night after night. Even though economics is the most humanities-like field at Tallinn University of Technology, I still feel that it is quite rewarding to write on the side.



Mari Saat (Photo by Scanpix)

**I think I understand you, since I also try to find the time for literature, besides my work in literary translation...**

Translation is incredibly hard. It is a self-sacrificing activity, where one is obliged to give up his or her own thoughts and enter the author. For me, it feels especially laborious to find the words. The image itself comes smoothly, it pops up on its own, and there is nothing complicated about that. Then again finding the right words requires a lot of work and the whole process becomes even more puzzling when it comes to translation.

**I could not agree more. Now let me ask you about your probably most popular book, the novel *Lasnamäe Lunastaja* (*The Saviour of Lasnamäe*, 2008, Tuum), the poignant and symbolic story of a single mother living in the biggest Soviet panel block district of Estonia. This is a book that**

**definitely deserves more international attention! I was wondering where the subject of the novel came from, because you spend your days in the wonderful Kadriorg district, you are Estonian, and you live a life that is supposedly significantly different from what the women of Lasnamäe you depict call their everyday reality. Have you done any fieldwork in order to get closer to this different reality and situation? To understand better what might be in the mind of someone so isolated?**

I haven't done any actual fieldwork but I have lived in all kinds of different places, from panel block flats to my actual home. The five of us, my husband, two children, grandmother and I, spent years in *khrushchyovkas* in such districts of Tallinn as Mustamäe and later Öismäe. To be honest it was a truly big thing, a real honour, to get your own apartment in a modern concrete block of flats in those days. In many ways,

the experiences of my characters I have experienced myself.

**At times one hears Estonians express negative feelings about Lasnamäe. I have the impression that it is considered a faraway and suspect part of town, rather dodgy in some way...**

There are dodgy places all around. Just take a walk down Viru Street on a Friday night! It is said to be the most dangerous place in all of Tallinn. One of my daughters used to live in Lasnamäe for some time and there are actually very nice neighbourhoods there. The specific Soviet architecture, the block of flats, are certainly there, but the district is actually surrounded by beautiful spots. For instance, next to my daughter's former home there is a path that leads straight to the river Pirita.

**Now back to your novel and its main character, Natalya Filippovna. How did the personality and the story of this single, Russian mother, drifting towards the edge, come to you?**

This character has a long history in my life. When my younger daughter was five, she made me take her to the freshly opened McDonald's to get a Happy Meal. She was so much into those little toys! In McDonald's we saw a bunch of Russian children too, happily out with their families, and then suddenly it came to me: the character of a woman, a Russian woman, emerged. Since I have always lived my life among Estonians, I didn't have much contact with Russian women, to be honest. All I knew was that they were hardworking and had little or no knowledge of Estonian. It was said that after Estonia regained independence finding a proper job and life in general became rather complicated for Russian women in their late 40s. It was even worse in the case of those who didn't speak Estonian. That situation made me start to think about how a Russian woman of that age would manage. A single mother, alone with her child, how would she get on?

At the same time, I had the impression that something was missing from this picture. The 90s was a period of economic growth, everything was going just incredibly

well and all I had was this character: the story was yet to evolve. I kept her in my mind for years, but no story surfaced. I think it was because I assumed that this woman lived well, was hardworking, quick-witted and earned the average Estonian salary, or even a bit more.

In the end, two events occurred that finally triggered the story. One was straight from my life, namely the question of braces, and the other one was more global, the crisis that hit the electronics industry in those days.

**Could you elaborate on that a little more?**

My daughter badly needed braces and, as we were sitting in the dental clinic waiting our turn and I started to figure out how much this all was going to cost, it turned out that, without exaggerating, it would take up half of the family's budget. In our household, where my husband and I were both active wage earners, we managed, but how was this single mother supposed to manage in a similar situation? Then I started to write down her ideas and the ways she would try to find the money to finance braces for her daughter and, unexpectedly, it dawned on me that she would have lost her job in the meantime. But of course! The Russian market collapsed with the declaration of independence and that inevitably dragged down the electronics industry as well. Natalya Filippovna, a single mother in her late 40s, became unemployed.

**Tell me more about her and the reasons why she becomes a prostitute after losing her job. Didn't she have a less soul-destroying possibility? Why has she chosen this way out?**

The way she chooses is something that quite a few women couldn't avoid at the time. The pimps, those taxis and houses, it was all tangible reality. That Russian taxi driver who gets Natalya involved in the "business" is a very important figure in the novel. He embodies Evil itself to some degree; he is the one who lures Natalya. The devil representing pure rationalism, the incarnation of capitalism in a world

where everything has to be and is expressed in monetary terms, where the idea of selling one's body is just a question of economic benefits.

**The exploited heroine of the novel is a representative of the Russian-speaking minority in Estonia. On the other hand, she is just a woman, which brings up once again many sensitive questions about equality and rights. Which one of these two aspects plays a more important role in the character of your main figure: the fact that she is Russian, or the fact that she is a woman. Both are minorities from a certain perspective.**

It is hard to say. Somehow I was straight-away sure about my character: she wasn't the result of a long process of contemplation. My characters are all born on their own and then if I'm lucky a story starts to surround them as well. Natalya was also born at once: a Russian woman.

Now that I look back, it seems that Natalya Filippovna is above all a character inspired by my own life. At the age of 45, I decided to look for a job to see whether it was possible at all for a woman in her 40s to get a job.

**To what extent is the fact that the main focus of *Lasnamäe lunastaja* is a Russian woman unique in the Estonian literary tradition? Are there any precedents for this: is an Estonian writer approaching the issue of Russian-speaking inhabitants a burning topic in contemporary culture and politics?**

It is still relatively surprising, but definitely not the first time that an Estonian writer has chosen to focus on a Russian character. There is Maimu Berg, with *I loved a Russian* (Tänapäev, 2004). Berg also deals with the anxieties and identity questions of the post-war era and a society undergoing major changes. Of course, Tammsaare's *I loved a German* is a book that is said to be the precursor of Berg's novel.

**Did this novel turn you into a spokesperson for Estonian Russians?**

Not really, to be honest, but it reminds me of a little anecdote from my excellent

Russian translator, Tatiana Teppe. Tatiana translated *Lasnamäe lunastaja* from Estonian. She told me how she walked into a basement shop in the centre of Tallinn, a place where mostly Russians work and shop, and overheard the shopkeepers' conversation about the novel. Those women said that reading this novel felt like reading about their own lives...

**Sounds like positive feedback! At the same time, weren't you reproached for strengthening and confirming certain prejudices that already existed concerning the Russian community?**

As I followed the commentaries on the novel on the internet, I indeed encountered some reproachful criticism. As you say, there was a fair amount of positive feedback too, but some people felt that my heroine was a walking stereotype who left the impression that all Russian-speaking inhabitants of Estonia were like her: down and out, having problems with the language and so desperate that they are forced to sell themselves. I must say that the allegorical figure of Natalya Filippovna was misunderstood in these cases.

**Let's focus on the linguistic aspect of the character: Natalya Filippovna struggles with Estonian, as do 17% of the residents of Estonia, according to the poll carried out in 2011 by Statistics Estonia. Can you share your experiences of that phenomenon? What is young Russians' attitude towards the Estonian language?**

I have experience mainly from the university I work at, which without doubt represents only a small part of society, but I can tell you about what I have observed there. Until the last financial crisis, studying in Estonian was clearly a growing trend among our students. It wasn't unusual for me to have as many as ten Russian natives in class who chose to speak Estonian with each other, because they didn't want to miss out on a single opportunity to practice. It was so popular! When the crisis hit us, there was a sudden change in attitudes. Many of our gifted and successful students have left Tallinn for England or Germany, hoping to find

better job opportunities in those countries. Estonian has become much less important than just a year ago. Native Russian students started focusing more on Western languages in order to assure their future. At the moment, the tide is turning again, since they have introduced the opportunity to study without a tuition fee if the candidate chooses to complete the degree in Estonian. At the same time, some would rather pay a tuition free in order to be able to take courses in English than study in Estonian for free. Many young Russians ask me: "Why should I learn Estonian? What's the point?" They prefer to study Finnish or English.

**In one of your articles published in *Eesti Päevaleht* in 2008 (*Kes on okupant?*), you say that the life of Russian youngsters nowadays is more complicated than it was for their parents back in their day. Can you comment on that in the light of the present situation, where political tension is becoming more and more present in people's everyday life?**

There are so many different stories, you know. Some Russians have completely integrated by now language-wise and from a cultural perspective too, others less so. One thing that we should keep in mind at all times is that the Russian people are not the Russian Federation. The key question is what those people are ready to support.

**That is a topic that deserves discussion, but now let us pay some attention to women and their roles. Natalya Filippovna finds a whole new range of opportunities in Estonia. Thanks to Estonian women, she discovers the fact that she can manage on her own, without the support of a man, in this country. Does this mean that Estonian women are more emancipated than their eastern neighbours?**

Estonian women are more emancipated. At least this is what Natalya Filippovna thinks.

**And what do you think?**

Estonians are colder in general. Not in the bad sense, but just practical, coolheaded, quiet and rational, whereas Russian

women are said to be more emotion driven. Estonian women tend to disguise their emotions and hide them behind their practical side. In fact, they are traditionally very independent, not letting any oppression or emotion overcome their autonomy. The women of the islands, who used to have the habit of carrying knives in their belts in case they were needed and to protect themselves, are a good example. The men were mostly off at sea or headed to the city for work, so all tasks around the farm and raising the children were the responsibilities of women. I believe that this is where their remarkable independence originates from. Another interesting thing is the value of motherhood: when an unmarried woman has a child, the members of the community don't necessarily turn their backs on her.

**The name Natalya Filippovna might evoke Dostoevsky's Nastasya Filippova. Is this striking similarity a coincidence?**

It is actually. It was a surprise for me, a complete coincidence. I have to admit that I am not very well read in Russian literature, despite the fact that I read a lot as a child. Back in the day, we only had *Crime and Punishment* at home, and so I had to find *The Idiot* myself.

**It is a widespread belief about Estonian literature that women prove themselves and excel mostly in poetry. You on the other hand have become a renowned prose writer. Have you ever written poetry?**

Not really. Well, I wrote a poem when I was ten (*laughs*), but I really don't have the slightest clue how to write poetry. At one point, I was asked by a gallerist to write free verse for one of my husband's [Raul Meel] albums. I was sort of forced to get down to poetry, but it just isn't meant for me. To be honest, I hardly read poetry and connect with very few poems, so I don't actually know what is supposed to be good poetry and what isn't. At the same time I am conscious of the fact that the Estonian language has great poets and it seems to me that Estonia is the land of poets.

**...and of women poets. Do you get inspiration from any of those women who have built up the long and illustrious tradition of Estonian women poets?**

Very little. A bit of Alver, Vaarandi, Under, maybe Viivi Luik the most, but, as I said, I don't read much poetry and when I want to read it I look on my shelves mostly for my favourite poets. My all time favourite is Juhan Liiv.

**In Hungary, the country where I am from, there is some kind of collective amnesia when it comes to women writers and poets, who generally stay in the background in terms of the literary canon.**

It is interesting to hear that, because there is no such distinction between male and female writers in Estonia in my experience. We don't perceive it as: "oh look, this book was written by a man, or a woman." It is the text that counts. I believe that this must have something to do with the fact that we have such a long tradition of women poets. They have been so actively present and their texts are so strong that gender just doesn't matter.

**How do you define yourself? Are you a woman writer?**

As I mentioned before, I think that this question doesn't matter in Estonia, so it doesn't play a role for me either. I have never considered myself to be a woman writer and I don't feel that I can identify with such labels. The way I usually read is the following: I take a book and I read it, and if I like it I often finish it in one go without even looking at the author's name. The main thing is literature itself in my opinion and not the sex of the author. In prose, I am looking for transparency; this is the main ingredient.

**Still, you are a woman and you write...**

And I even have children (*laughs*). But as a writer I have the impression that the physical body isn't of much help; it actually disturbs my writing.

**To what extent has the role of the writer changed in the post-socialist society of the**

**21st century, compared to the situation in the Soviet Union?**

In my opinion, a lot has changed in literature, as well as in the arts. Back in the Soviet times it was extremely important for people to read Estonian books because Estonians were eager to preserve the language. Estonian writers played a key role in the aspiration to create and preserve a living, modern language. These days the writer is just one of many creative beings, writing has become a lot more marginal, and there is simply less at stake it seems. They say that people read less nowadays, but I think that Estonians still read relatively a lot. The thing is that in the USSR books were published in editions of 25 000 copies and sold for a few kopecks. Books have become less accessible for the masses and the competition is greater; there is plenty of foreign literature to choose from.

**What are your literary plans for the future?**

One can no longer make a living as a writer. Back in the day, I tried to have a book published every other year, but these days, with all of my day-to-day duties, I try to publish one every four years. The situation actually has its benefits since I can write about what I want. This gives me enough room, freedom and independence. As I mentioned before, I struggle with time and priorities, but I can proudly announce that for the first time in my life I have a real contract. I got an offer from an editor to write about the end of the 50s and beginning of the 60s. Nobody wants to write about that period; they tend to say that it was a nasty time, but it was my youth. I don't think that the book will take the shape of a novel; it will be more like memories of how we used to live, what was on my mind back then, what the situation was like in Estonia...

I was actually trying to get down to writing before your arrival.

**Time to get back to work then. Thank you very much for your time and the privilege of being here.**

# Estonian culture and literature

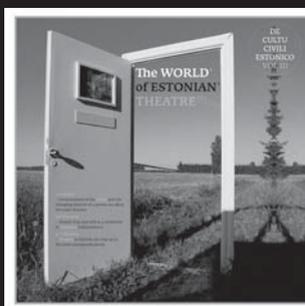
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More information about Estonian literature can be found in the booklet The World of Estonian Literature, available in three languages. Estonian Art appears twice a year, and we have booklets on a number of other topics as well. Estonian society, history and nature is introduced at [www.estonica.org](http://www.estonica.org)

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Eesti Instituut

# Rock

b y H a s s o K r u u l l

**There are poets who almost never go public. Of course, they sometimes publish their poems, and sometimes they go to public readings. But they will never take part in any public campaign, they are almost invisible in the media and their readership is so precisely targeted that they might be called “poets for poets”. However, even this is not completely true, because not all poets read poetry. Their precisely targeted readership can better be described as the silent ones, the invisible ones, the reflective ones – in short, the most unpublic ones, like the poet himself.**

No doubt Kalju Kruusa is such a poet. His pen-name is quite telling in this respect, because it sounds so ordinary and insignificant. Nonetheless, after a closer look we may say that it is a minimal poem in itself, as Kalju means a large rock in Estonian, and Kruusa is the genitive form of fine gravel. So the name might be read as an oxymoron (a large rock made of fine gravel), or as an allegory of immeasurable time, an aeon (finally even a large rock becomes fine gravel). That name encompasses a contradiction and an irresolvable ambivalence, but it also points to the poet’s inclination to invent hidden puns and to make rare discoveries in his mother tongue that only a patient eye can detect. Rock Gravel is a poet who will never be satisfied with merely finding the *mot juste* or concocting an objective correlative to express an emotion:

he also needs to reinvent his mother tongue, to make words meet in a way that has never happened before.

But there is more. Kalju Kruusa is also a multilingual scholar who has translated poetry from several languages (including Italian, Japanese, Korean, Mandarin, Hawaiian and Finnish). His poetry books carry obvious signs of his wide reading in literatures inaccessible to most Estonian readers. Often there are sinographs in between the Estonian phrases that sometimes indicate proper names or specific terms, but may sometimes be a source of inspiration for a whole new poem. This does not mean that Kruusa’s poems are somewhat extravagant: on the contrary, he seems to depart from an aesthetics that has been described by François Jullien as bland. One

# Gravel

## Kalju Kruusa as a Public Figure

may take as an example a single poem, “Mountain Meditation” (*Mäemytlus*), from his 2008 book *I Am Also Moved by Clouds as Well* (*Pilvedgi mindgi liigutavadgi*). The title of the poem in Estonian rhymes with “mountain sermon” (*mäejutlus*), but there is no visible Christian content; instead, the starting point is an old haiku poem by Kobayashi Issa, “*katatsuburi soro-soro nobore fuji no yama*” (Climb Mount Fuji, O snail, but slowly, slowly). The poem itself is a reflection on travelling and the mountains, evidently referring to the Zen-Buddhist parable by Seigen Ishin: “Before I had studied Zen for thirty years, I saw mountains as mountains, and waters as waters. When I arrived at a more intimate knowledge, I came to the point where I saw that mountains were not mountains, and waters were not waters. But now that I have got its very substance I am at rest. For it’s just that I see mountains once again as mountains, and waters once again as waters.” It seems that the “I” of the poem has been in the mountains several times, but he is doubtful about their reality as mountains in the third sense, “mountains once again as mountains”:

*Sestpeale aina on kaasas mäenägemus,  
aga ise vist ikkagi veel liiga nooreohtu,  
nii et ei saa kindlalt endale lubada  
mägede sajaprossast mägemust.*

*Since then I carry along the mountain vision,  
but maybe I'm still too young*

*and cannot indulge myself one hundred per cent  
in mountains as mountains.*

In Estonian the word *mäenägemus*, “mountain vision” involves magical connotations, because *nägemus* can be interpreted as an epiphany, and *nägemine*, “vision”, as clairvoyance. These words do not rhyme, but Kruusa has invented a new word, *mägemus*, which cannot be translated. However, the new concept can be described as a quality that constitutes mountains as mountains. Thus a Zen parable has been compressed into a single neologism.

Kalju Kruusa’s latest book, *ing-veri-tee*, also has a Chinese title, 灵血茶. As one critic has noted, this is not a Chinese word, but is composed of three different components: “soul”, “blood” and “way”. However, in Estonian the title can equally be understood as “ginger tea”. But this is just the beginning of the linguistic puns and ambivalences that the book abounds in. Even the translations of other poets included in *ing-veri-tee* often scintillate with strange colours, so that Kalju Kruusa sometimes resembles a medium lending his voice to others, and sometimes seems to borrow their vehemence and intensity to write his own poetry.

Now we can ask why. Why does Kalju Kruusa build such multi-layered compositions to achieve a subdued result that should be called bland? I think three answers are available. First, Kalju Kruusa has never succumbed to the condescending moralists of the last decade

who tirelessly repeated that multiculturalism was passé. Of course, everybody knows that most of the people in the north fear southern immigrants, that nationalists, skinheads and fundamentalists always have the upper hand, and that cultural relativism is a deadly sin for lowbrows and highbrows alike. However, the convulsions of modern democracy cannot exhaust the multicultural idea. If we turn to music or literature, multiculturalism seems more successful than ever; there is an overall excitement about cultural differences, not just for being so funny but because of their capacity to bring important insights. A difference cannot be an ahistorical value in itself: it might sometimes bring damage, sometimes abundance and sometimes be simply beneficent. It's not merely naïve, but mean to think that multiculturalism is over because the social and political collisions have created too much evil: this resembles a judgement like "there is nothing new under the sun". I think Kalju Kruusa's poetry is a brilliant example that the most distant ideas can sometimes touch our intimate imaginations, rejuvenating our souls, invigorating our blood and preparing our way. He not only proves this, but also enacts it.

Secondly, one can say that Kalju Kruusa is willing to share an experience. Experience is always singular, if it really deserves the name; otherwise, it would be mere consumption or vagary. But how to share a singular experience? How should one traverse the borderline of individuality? It is possible but needs specification, unfamiliar words and phrases, until it looks somewhat strange and distant. Then this strangeness itself might become familiar. An emblematic poem is "Jungle Funk", which describes the arrival of elephants while the protagonists are still sleeping; at first, they have an impulse to escape, but soon (in the next two lines) they decide to "crawl deeper into bed". Only later do they realize that the event is no more than a visit from somewhere far off:

*kulus aega kuni  
maha rahunesime  
saades aru et need on  
kyigest ebatavalised*

*kauged imeloomad  
kes järsku tulid meile  
veidikese imet looma  
külalised elevandid*

*it took some time  
to calm down  
as we understood  
it was nothing but unfamiliar*

*distant beasts of wonder  
who turned up  
to give us a bit of a miracle  
visiting elephants*

After the experience is shared, it loses all its extravagant qualities and becomes "nothing but unfamiliar distant beasts of wonder". The "jungle funk" is in fact an ordinary episode; it is not peculiar in itself, but the poem somehow manages to reveal its singularity, making it appear almost surrealistic. But isn't surrealism just a mixture of dream and reality? And isn't it so very ordinary to dream? The only peculiar aspect here is the event of sharing. We know that sharing is often illegal today (e.g. sharing files in your computer), but this act of sharing is even more clandestine, because what is being shared is not something that can be digitally copied and reproduced but a singular event that cannot be traced. Therefore it constitutes a most radical attack on the mainstream media. While the mainstream media sell images, phrases and narratives that are both universal and extraordinary (e.g. cars jumping, burning and exploding, advertising the utmost special supermega products, etc.), Kalju Kruusa shares an experience that is both singular and ordinary, destroying the borderline of personal individuality that is the cornerstone of market exchange. "Jungle funk" belongs to everybody and nobody; it is the most precious thing and yet cannot be personalized or individualized.

That seems enough to explain what Kalju Kruusa is striving for in poetry. However, I still have a third answer to add. This is as bland as Kalju Kruusa's poetry. But to start with, I should cite a sonnet from *ing-veri-tee* in its entirety.

*sessinatses ilmas*

*inimeste arvukus kasvab pidevalt  
viimase poole sajandi jooksul oma neli miljardit  
ja juurdekasvu tempo pigem kiireneb  
kusjuures inimeste arvukuse kasvuga*

*on kaasnendud loomade arvukuse vähenemine  
paljude loomaliikide hoogne hävinemine  
iga jumala aasta hävib ainuüksi liike  
oletatavasti mitmete tuhandete kaupa*

*see näitab et asjad lähevad paremuse poole  
ühe enam loomi sünnib ümber inimesteks  
peagi saabub aeg mil loomaks sündijaid enam ei olegi*

*jääb ainult oodata millal asjad nii heaks lähevad  
et aina enam olendeid üldse ümbersündide ahelast pääseb  
ja inimesedki maamuna pealt kaovad*

*in this world*

*the number of human beings increases incessantly  
four billion in the last half century  
and the growth rate also quickens  
while the increase in human population*

*also involves a decrease in animal population  
several species are rapidly disappearing  
I guess every year of the Lord thousands of species  
are destroyed for ever*

*this is an indication of progress  
more and more animals reincarnate as humans  
soon nobody will be born into animal form*

*we just have to wait for the process to be completed  
as more and more beings are saved from the cycle of rebirths  
and humans will also vanish from the earth*

The message seems to be very simple: progress is unavoidable and brings about necessary salvation (in the Buddhist sense). In the first place, all animals will disappear, and soon human beings will also follow. (Kruusa seems to have excluded the possibility that everybody might be reborn as cockroaches, but this is not important here.) However, the sonnet includes an important blind spot at the beginning of the second tercet: “we just have to wait”, much more impersonal in Estonian (*jääb oodata*). Who will be waiting for the process to be completed? This unanswerable question creates a strange anonymous space,

where a certain voice seems to emerge that belongs simultaneously to everybody and nobody. I would like to call this space “Kalju Kruusa as a public figure”.

Mallarmé once said that “le poème est la seule bombe” (“the poem is the only bomb”). He meant that although terrorism is justified, it can never achieve its desired end. When I have heard Kalju Kruusa reading his poems aloud in public, I have always felt that a silent bomb is exploding. The blast slowly expands, destroys everything in its way, and smashes the vicious mind into the ground. Of course, the vicious mind is the human mind itself, but the voice of the poet is always slightly inhuman, just as every Buddha is always slightly inhuman. This is how Kalju Kruusa finally becomes a public figure. By creating a vacuum, an empty space, which might be perceived as dangerous for no obvious reason, but that is also endlessly soothing. Here he stands, here he speaks, here rock turns into gravel. This sound is inimitable. It holds the promise of seeing mountains once again as mountains, and waters once again as waters. It keeps the *mägemus*, “mountain vision”, spreading around everywhere without ever being noticed. Here is the messenger; here is the message; here is the receiver of the message.



# Every moment is a well

Excerpts from  
**Kristiina Ehin's**  
North America  
Journal

In January 2013 Kristiina Ehin's book of poetry entitled *1001 Winters* was published in the US by The Bitter Oleander Press. It is a comprehensive bilingual selection of previously published as well as new work, comprising 100 poems, and as such is the largest single collection of her work available not only in English, but in Estonian as well. Kristiina had already published eight books in English, but this was the first to appear in North America. In the summer of 2012 we had begun planning a tour of the US for Kristiina and Silver Sepp, to take place in the autumn of 2013 to mark the publication of the book and the appearance of Silver's new CD, *Mis asi see on (What Is This Thing)*. I contacted my old friends in the American literary world, poet and translator Bill Wolak, poet Joan Digby and her husband, the poet and collage artist John Digby. I was hoping they would be able to organise two, three, perhaps even four performances to stretch the trip out to two weeks and make the long journey from Estonia worthwhile, but the project

soon took on a life of its own, as there was already great enthusiasm for Kristiina's work. Bill organised a performance at the Grolier Poetry Bookshop, America's oldest poetry bookshop, where all the notable American poets of the last 90 years and many famous poets from abroad have read their work. He also contacted his own publisher, Stanley Barkan of Cross-Cultural Communications, who immediately decided to publish a small selection of Kristiina's work, *In a Single Breath*, to coincide with the tour. Bill, Joan and Stanley organised appearances at universities and cultural centres. I also contacted Estonians in North America who promote Estonian culture. Singer Kristi Roosmaa Tootell, who is also Cultural Affairs Coordinator at the Estonian Consulate in New York, organised a performance at the very prestigious venue of the New York Public Library. Maria Belovas, Third Secretary at the Estonian Embassy in Washington responsible for Media Relations organised an appearance at the Delegation of the European Union to the United States, in their "Conversations in Culture" series. Piret Noorhani of Tartu College in Toronto organised a week consisting of reading-concerts, a lecture and a workshop in Toronto. In the end, the tour comprised twelve appearances in Toronto, Cambridge, New York, New Jersey, Long Island and Washington, squeezed into four weeks. Such an extended tour of North America is, to the best of my knowledge, unprecedented for an Estonian writer.

Kristiina and Silver kept a journal in the form of a blog during their journey. A few excerpts from Kristiina's entries are below. The complete blog can be found at <http://vuhisevpilv.wordpress.com/> (in Estonian) and <http://lehtpere.blogspot.co.uk/p/kuidas-torontos-kristiina-kui-18nda.html> (in English).

Their next North America tour is to California in October 2014 to launch Kristiina's new book of stories, *Walker on Water*. (Ilmar Lehtpere)



Our day at Niagara Falls and our picnic there, which a policeman broke up very politely when we were already getting ready to go (much in the manner of “all right, finish your song, finish your sandwich but then, forgive me but I’m afraid I have to ask you to leave — this is actually private property”...a fact that would never have occurred to me on this little patch of grass a few dozen metres away from the waterfall)...in any case the uncovered parts of my body had been left with quite a tan...

America has begun for me charmingly yet wildly. Silver has quite tempestuously begun writing poems and his muses are mainly the local dogs. The days continue to be sunny and it seems that that bright Niagara Falls day is going on and on. Actually by evening I don’t remember where this day began. In general hundreds and hundreds of kilometres from here where Halloween pumpkins rolled out in front of the houses glow through the early morning mist (they and all sorts of brooms, masks and spiderwebs are already selling everywhere like hotcakes). My first impressions of Americans are engaging and funny. To tell the truth I haven’t laughed so much in a long time, especially about myself. After the ease of the company of Estonians living abroad in Canada, it’s difficult to make myself understood — not because of the language, but because it’s necessary to speak fast, clearly and briefly so people don’t tire of listening. So I often have to say the same thing several times. But when understanding has

been achieved, comes the fulfillment of all wishes. I suppose this is the famous American dream.



Our first performance was at the Grolier Poetry Bookshop, the oldest poetry bookshop in the US, directly next to Harvard University. Cambridge, Massachusetts was teeming with Friday evening student life, and the bookshop, where all the famous poets from T.S. Eliot to the Beats and up to the present day have appeared, felt endearingly old-fashioned and dignified.



The two main culprits of our trip — my bilingual books of poetry *1001 Winters — 1001 talve* and *In a Single Breath — Ühe hingetõmbega* in the Grolier Poetry Bookshop



The owner of the Grolier, Ifeanyi Menkiti, American poet and philosophy lecturer from Nigeria points to photos of the famous poets who have appeared at the bookshop since 1927. Meeting Ifeanyi and his wife has been one of the loveliest moments of discovery on this US tour.



Together with poets Bill Wolak and Kristine Doll on her veranda in the witches' town of Salem. We got to hear which houses are haunted and who is going with whom, felt very sunny days and magical hospitality... and my dream of someday having a B&B like Kristine's revived — a place where friends, poets and artists would be made to feel welcome. To have room and light for all my dear people, animals and birds.

Our Bill is the most cheerful and optimistic poet I have ever met. He was the one who usually drove us from place to place, took photos, and kept us in a good mood on very long journeys and when a

feeling of jumping into the water in an unknown place arose before performances. It was sad to wave good-bye to him.

Silver has just opened the window and shouted "Good morning America!" down to 37th St teeming 90 metres below. The poor fellow only just woke up and didn't even see what conscientious people like myself saw several hours ago — the sun rising big and red over Queens, heaving itself up to reflect in the East River, pouring a yellowish-pink glow over the grey piers, the first drowsy joggers and me, who was standing somewhere on the border between sleep and wakefulness on the 28th floor behind huge windows, holding an earthenware teacup in my hands... This city makes me a little moonstruck and without my kind hostess Renna Unt's bookshelves full of Estonian literature I probably wouldn't have fallen asleep at all (the therapeutic effect of the mother tongue, Estonian forests, bogs, moors, safely quarrelsome people...)

After the little seaside town of Oyster Bay (which reminded me a bit of Rapla, the town I grew up in), where the crickets chirp loudly as they should in September and all the pigeons, gulls, cats and dogs act as if there are no cities with buildings stretching up to the sky, this first sunrise in New York feels as if I have landed on another planet, which has nevertheless always been here, very close, only an hour's drive away.

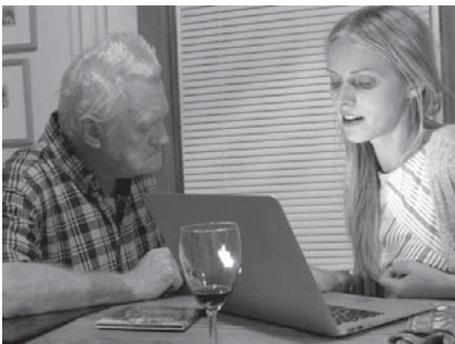
Our hostess in Oyster Bay was Joan Digby, lecturer, poet, author of many books and publisher. She's a real New York woman — very active, cheerful, determined. In her there is none of the auntie that in Estonia can easily develop with the years. If she likes the music, she dances. If she really likes it, she sings — in the kitchen, living room or stuck in a traffic jam. Her mother had taught her to drive in New York — "Now pull in to the right in front of the bus, now slip through between the taxis, quickly pull into the tunnel, get in the right lane, step on it, go!" If some driver on the roads between New York and Oyster Bay annoys her, she reacts straight away. But her nerves

generally seem to be under control. She goes riding on her white horse Snowball several times a week, has two cats — Daisy and Sissi — plays tennis and feeds a colony of fifteen cats she established from the goodness of her heart near the university. Joan in fact seems younger than many people of my own age, yet there is the secure rooted world of Estonian mothers and grandmothers in her — even the food she prepares seems to be straight from Estonian festivities.



I could go on about our hosts in Oyster bay for a very long time. Joan's husband is John Digby, poet, translator, surrealist and one of America's most famous collagists, who has written books on the subject, had dozens of exhibitions and produced thousands of works.

For health reasons John wasn't able to go to our performance, so we improvised a literature and music evening for him and he responded in kind.



I think it is no exaggeration to say that John's sense of humour is as riotous as any I have ever encountered. He is English and says his black sense of humour was born of a survival instinct in the face of America's "nation of idiots". Joan chuckles and obviously doesn't feel offended. I tried to write down some of John's wit but on paper it seems like a pitiful shadow of the real thing. But nevertheless: John says that the most important thing in keeping house is putting the work of male and female poets on separate shelves, even in separate rooms. He admits that he didn't use to know that and the bookshelves kept filling up, the books procreated and the piles of books kept growing. But now he is careful to keep them apart and the number of books has begun to shrink. At least there are no new additions he announces with a sigh of relief. We sit down to dinner. Silver isn't there. We call him. Finally I go into the back garden to summon him, but he still doesn't come. John is obviously getting impatient. Finally Joan, holding a big knife in her hand, brings the roast and puts it on the table. It is much like in Estonia — a big lean hunk of meat with potatoes, all swimming in gravy. John looks at Joan and the roast with a petrified air "What did you do to him? Where is the rest of Silver?" he asks his wife in a voice brimming with horror. We come back from our performance — John is lying down in his room. I look in. I happen to be wearing a black, flowing, festive dress. John gives me a sharp look and interrupts me saying: You've come to a funeral but as you can see I'm still alive. Today John insisted that I buy him a second hand coffin when he pops his clogs. He assured me that second hand things are all more durable. During breaks in his work, which demands a high degree of precision, he always stresses that if he had to choose, he would rather give up his testicles than his spectacles.



At Long Island University Poetry Center. People had come from near and far and it's difficult to imagine a more congenial place to perform.



New York, Washington... hmm, at first I kept looking up out of habit acquired following a week between skyscrapers, but there's no point here. Today my eyes have come down to Estonian level again. I have a good, homely feeling. Here there are beautiful low houses, big gardens, a lot of green and nature, great monuments, lush Virginia grass. But also women in proper suits, men with briefcases, official talk and a bit of careless elegance... a helicopter rumbling past to transport some government official from one roof-top landing pad to another.

We went to visit Hellar and Irja Grabbi. Stepping over their threshold was like arriving back home — so much Estonian literature and art, stories and memories about our history and culture. We sat on the sofa where former presidents Arnold Rüütel

and Lennart Meri had slept, though of course not together.



Hellar says that he only regrets that *Mana*, the literary magazine he was director and editor of and which connected Estonian literature at home and abroad, couldn't appear more regularly.

Yesterday we went to visit Silver's relatives. Silver met them for the second time in his life. Bill's grandfather and Silver's great-grandfather were brothers, if I remember correctly. Bill was born in America but is of pure Estonian descent. Plucking his banjo at home in his living room he says "My father never talked about Estonia. Once he said that this river here in Dakota is like the way out to sea between the jetties in Treimani harbour. He said it was all just the same. Later, when I went to independent Estonia and sailed out from Treimani harbour, I understood what Father meant and for me it was a very important moment of discovery."

We look for the exotic on our travels, but for me the most important moments have been those where things are the same —

that things that unite are greater than the things that separate.

Ten performances done, two to go. European House tonight and NY Public Library tomorrow...

The event at European House was quite rousing. I felt that I had a lot of energy. And we got very positive feedback from Ambassador Marina Kaljurand and Francois Rivasseau, the Deputy Head of of the European Union Delegation. The organisers thought our performance was the best of the series.



My leg has slowly started to heal. I pulled a muscle in NY running away from a lout. In a relatively deserted street in Greenwich village we came face to face with a man who tried to block our way and started rushing aggressively at Silver. We remembered Ilmar Lehtpere's words that if anyone starts acting too strangely in NY, the best thing to do is run. And that is just what we did. We ran for our lives. The man running for his life after us. We ran the whole length of the street.

And at the very moment when I felt that something went in my thigh and I couldn't run any more, the man gave up and went back the way we had come, grumbling "Fast guys...". We were faster than him. Since then I've been going round with a bit of a limp and have been skipping my morning run. But tonight we are planning to go to a Cuban Salsa club after our performance and there I will try to walk more properly...

Unfortunately, in Washington it was impossible to find a good place to go dancing after eleven. Like weekdays in Tartu or Viljandi, I thought. But it was an experience in itself to take in the last draughts of the capital's air in full sail with a group of blonde-haired Estonian girls.



Performing at the universities I sometimes felt that I had to explain that if there are sea maidens, the daughters of the Livonian Sea Mother, in my poems, then these are not beauty-queen proportioned, happy-end Disney characters with long eyelashes, but rather... well, those who understood, did, and those who didn't understand couldn't be helped by explanations. And the audience reacted with great surprise when I mentioned that in our adult lives Silver and I had gone through a long period without a TV and we didn't particularly miss it.

Yet Americans still left the impression of being actively involved in traditional culture. All the multi-cultural aspects here, the halloween ghosts and the children whose imaginations are inspired by these as much

as our children are by old Estonian St Martin's and St Katharine's traditions, which also involve masked visitings. Yes, one might say that that it's all commerce, but I would have nothing against Martin's and Katharine's Day masks being sold, alongside the candles and other things. I also don't understand why no one in Estonia has thought of making dolls of the characters in Oskar Luts's classic novels. I know lots of girls who would throw their Barbies in the corner for a Teele doll. Why not make traditional holidays and cultural history part of popular culture? In global terms this element of Estonian pop culture would be a quirky niche product. There are those among us who would say these old traditional Estonian holidays have too deep a significance... and there are those who say they have lost their meaning. I believe the truth is somewhere in between. But there is no explanation for adopting other cultures' pumpkins and skeletons.

We have twelve performances behind us. Many people said that it was difficult to classify our performances — a mixture of poetry, song, prose, music, dance and story telling. Some performances were of a more academic nature, at others no one remained in their seat and the celebration and the dancing didn't want to end. For the last performances we worked out a song that we sang and played together — “Viimased lumeta päevad — The Very Last Days Without Snow”. I felt that it expressed something that was in the air and in many hearts, not only our own.



At the New York Public Library, our last performance, in a beautiful old building in the heart of New York... Apparently we were the first Estonians to ever perform there.

There were many surprise guests at the Public Library performance. Like the well-known songwriter Mark Barkan together with his daughter, and well-known poets from all around New York... There were many surprising moments where I didn't know what was coming... but everything went well and rousing, and I felt that it was indeed a knowledgeable literary audience that dared to express itself with applause and exclamations.



Back in Estonia. The days and nights are mixed up anyway and it requires a special effort of will to come to terms with the fact that, after the elections, our capital is still Savisaargorod. But Silver has no worries and plans to follow his relatives' invitation to go to small western Estonian islands to catch sheep. And my son Hannes looks into the shop windows and asks, “Mummy, why are the pumpkins with faces supposed to be frightening?”

# Mihkel Mutt talks to John O'Brien

Dalkey Archive Press publishes fiction, poetry and literary criticism. It is based in the United States (Illinois), Dublin and London. Dalkey Archive Press specialises in the publication or republication of lesser known, often avant-garde works. The publisher is named for the novel *The Dalkey Archive* by the Irish author Flann O'Brien. Founded in Chicago in 1984, Dalkey Archive began as an adjunct press to the literary magazine *Review of Contemporary Fiction*, itself founded by John O'Brien, John Byrne, and Lowell Dunlap and dedicated to highlighting writers who were overlooked by the mainstream critical establishment. Initially, the Press reprinted works by authors that were featured in the *Review* but eventually branched out to other works, including original works that had not before been published. In December 2006, Dalkey Archive relocated to the University of Illinois in Champaign-Urbana to be part of the university's commitment to global projects that will complement the Press's commitment to translations.

**MM: Your business is largely non-profitable. You have to find money all the time. A hat in hand. Are you a good 'chugger'? And what's your general feeling — has it become easier or more difficult to obtain funding over the past decades? Who are the main donators? From their point of view — is it a kind of spiritual charity? Part of political correctness agenda (be nice to the 'other'!)?**

JO'B: Dalkey has nonprofit/charitable status, and this means (in part) that no one

'owns' the company, and no individual can reap profits, if there were profits to reap. Foundations in the States can give grants only to nonprofits, and individuals receive tax breaks by making donations (better to support a cause you like than to hand over so much of it to government). But now to answer your question: getting support has become easier, but primarily because I have made great efforts to work with funding agencies, especially foreign government ones. The bureaucracy and red tape can be quite cumbersome. Last year we received

funding from 52 different sources, and most of them were governmental. This means 52 applications, 52 reports, and 52 grants to keep track of.

The two big donors/grant-makers currently are Georgia and Korea, with whom we have a multi-year series whereby we are doing 5 books per year from each country. This amounts to approximately \$60,000 per year from each country. From the countries' point of view, the support is there because it means that the artistic work in their countries can be shared with people who cannot read, for instance, Estonian. And since English is currently the lingua franca, a work in English can be read by publishers around the world and frequently leads to further translations into other languages. There may be a rather direct political purpose in all of this (e.g., foreign trade, attracting companies to a country, even tourism), but so what? Why shouldn't there be?

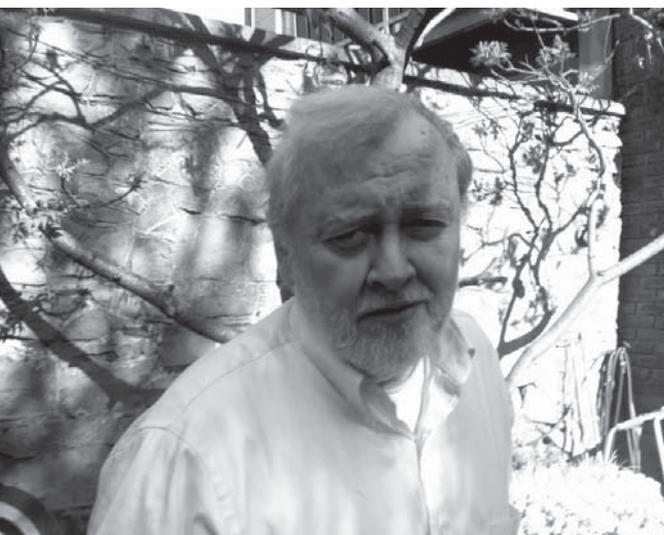
**You have said that you highly regard literatures of lesser spoken languages because one can find fresh and genuinely innovative pieces of art there, more than in the big mainstream literatures. Experimentation, so to say, is rife in the Baltics. I wonder if it is more of a conclusion you have drawn or a preconception? Why should we in Estonia be so damned different and alternative? Maybe my greatest ambition as an author is to be an amalgam of Huxley, Maugham and Waugh?**

And what a wonderful amalgam this is! But this is possible only because of translation. No one can read all the languages of the world, and so must depend on translations. I have a few things to say about the 'lesser-spoken' languages. First, I don't find American literature right now to be very interesting, and I have always — since the age of 14 — been reading literatures from other countries because I am one of those cursed with the need to read. One of the first

'serious' novels I read at 14 was Dostoyevsky's *The Idiot*. The distinction I make with literature is that between the good and the bad, or between the interesting and the dull — rather than a distinction between one country and another.

Because of the peculiarities of Dalkey Archive Press, I have the luxury of publishing books from well over a century. I look for the 'best' works available, not the most timely ones, or the big successes of the year, books which are usually forgotten about within two weeks. There are certainly more works in other countries that are waiting to be found than there are in the United States. I already know the works in the United States. Of course, one of my favorite examples of finding works that were waiting to be found is Mati Unt's *Things in the Night*. It is such a delightful, confusing, lyrical, passionately singular work of literature. It is such works as this one that I try to find in the Baltic states and everywhere else. And we know that American and British publishers are not longing for the opportunity to publish such non-commercial fiction. And to answer your question: my view is a conclusion after publishing so many books that fall within this vague category of 'unconventional.' But I could put you to sleep for hours by expounding on this subject of 'unconventional.' I think the books I publish are quite conventional, if one knows anything about the history of fiction rather than the mistaking the deadly realism of the past 50 years or so.

**Sometimes it seems to me that as there is virtually no possibility for a writer from an 'unknown' small country to enter the world book market, it makes him or her really free. Because if this possibility existed — most of us human beings would be ready, even if unconsciously, to adjust to the needs of this market. What these needs are — *sap.sat*. But now I can sleep soundly.**



## Who are the Estonian authors on Dalkey's radar screen?

Here is a list of authors that I wish to publish, and in some cases have already published, or am about to publish: Rein Raud, Mati Unt, Toomas Vint, Tõnu Õnnepalu, Mihkel Mutt, Peeter Sauter, Yuri Lotman, Maarja Kangro, Ene Mihkelson, Viivi Luik, Jaan Kaplinski, Doris Kareva.

You will see that I am not giving titles because they would be a strange mix of half-translated English titles and Estonian ones. But you can assume that there are more than one book by the authors. From my last trip I came away with 13 titles that we should pursue, and will pursue.

Yes, trying to write for a 'world market' is rather hopeless. As you well know, a writer or any artist functions within constrictions of interests, experience, the voices in his head. If a writer could sit down and dash off a long novel that would sell a million copies, then he would, and probably should. But that's not within the scope of what a particular writer can do, or even wants to do. Most writers I know write to please themselves, and write because they are compelled to write. The 'world market,' especially these days, is an ever-receding world for writers concerned with art. Except for a few aberrations, this is the way it has always been. I think it's a great mistake for a writer — as well as a publisher such as Dalkey — to think in terms of numbers as the means for judging success. People who make toothpaste have to worry about numbers, and let them worry. Dalkey tries to reach as many readers as it can, and so it should be trying to do so. But those are small numbers in comparison to mass-media numbers. I know that donors are found of numbers, but they should be entirely focused on quality, or else they too should go into the corporate world of toothpaste.

The question is 'when?' The 'when' is entirely dependent on funding that is made available. The only realistic way of Dalkey Archive keeping a steady flow of Estonian literature being published is by establishing a fund within the Press that would ensure, for instance, that two to three titles would appear each year, that Dalkey could think in terms of multi-year marketing, and that previously published titles could be resurrected every year because this would be an ongoing project rather than just another randomly published title every few years that will soon disappear into that world of 'old books' with little marketplace value. The crime of our time — 'our time' being the last fifty years or so — is that literary culture gets reduced to marketplace value, and America is the most guilty for this crime. So, what I am trying to do with a few countries that I am especially interested in is to re-conceive how books are treated in our culture. Art does not grow old, but it does in the current publishing world, and the funding practices of most countries does not help to change this situation. There must be individuals in Estonia who want the country's literature and authors read and known in the rest of the world and to have a permanent place there.

That is what an endowed fund would accomplish.

**Do you see anybody on the horizon who will take over from you in 20 years?**

Mihkel, I don't have 20 years left in me. On some days I wonder if I have one left, though this may be an Irish proclivity to dwell on death. But as for Dalkey Archive: I hope that it will survive me, and I have a few young staff member who show great promise in taking it over from me. I am one or two staff people away from feeling reassured about this. But it's difficult finding people who are absolutely committed to such a cause, who live and breathe literature and the publication of literature, and who has exquisite tastes and yet can also read and understand business reports. The biggest challenge right now is building a financial base for the support that will carry it into the distant future, well beyond my time. Dalkey is the only publisher in the States and the UK and Ireland who believes that literature needs to be protected and should function outside of the marketplace as the decider of what people want. I am hoping that this financial base will come by way of help from countries who will aid the Press to build an endowment which will ensure that the Press will publish a certain number of books from those countries. I don't expect that the government itself will be able to provide this kind of support, but that it will be instrumental in identifying individuals who will want to establish an endowed series that will be self-supporting and will be named after the donor. With such a joint effort with a country, the Press would be able to do so much more for the books it publishes and for the writers. To return to your first question about being nonprofit: Dalkey Archive wants to be even more aggressive in finding those writers around the world, and to publish them in the best way, to make sure that the books reach the readers who remain hungry for this kind of literary work and for whom reading is the

basis for a 'good life.' I think such financial resources exist in every country, but the Press needs the help to find them and to encourage them to support their countries' literature and writers.

**Finally — what's the demon inside you?**

No one has ever asked me this question so bluntly. There is a 'demon' and I know little about him/her/it. It has its dark side, and its generous side. It is, I think, driven by a sense of injustice and a desire to change the state of things. Dalkey Archive was born out of a spirit of saying, "You're all wrong out there, you don't know what's good and what isn't". I was out to prove that everyone was wrong: academics, critics, funders, governments. They all had their self-protective systems that inevitably shut out what's new and what's difficult. And their motives are often ones that serve their own personal interests rather than improving the world they live in. I wanted to upset the apple-cart, make people uncomfortable, and especially make institutions uncomfortable. There have been many dark days for the Press over the years, many days when I felt like giving up, but then this demon would awake and push me to try to do even more. I will also say that I am not on particularly good terms with this demon. I have never cared very much about what others think of me. This will sound bloated and self-aggrandizing, but the truth is what matters, that has to be our guide, even if we're wrong. Compromising, getting along, and making good impressions are probably virtues for a happier life, but they are all rather foreign to me, or at least to my demon.

# 2013

## Estonian Literary Awards

b y P i r e t V i i r e s

In 2013, the Cultural Award of the Republic of Estonia in literature went to the distinguished translator from German **Mati Sirkel**, for translating *Saksa Ordu ajalugu* (Klaus Militzer, History of the Teutonic Order), *Nii taevas kui ka maa peal* (Werner Bergengruen, In Heaven as on Earth), *Vergiliuse surm* (Hermann Broch, Death of Virgil) and *Vanad meistrid* (Thomas Bernhard, Old Masters).

**Andrus Kivirähk** received the annual award of the Estonian Cultural Endowment in 2013 for his novel *Maailma otsas. Pildikesi heade inimeste elust* (At the end of the world. Scenes from the Lives of Good People), for his continuing high-level work and the international success of his *Mees, kes teadis ussisõnu* (The man who spoke Snakish).

The genre awards of the Estonian Cultural Endowment's Literature Foundation in 2013 were distributed as follows.

**Andrus Kivirähk** also received the annual prose award for his novel *Maailma otsas: pildikesi heade inimeste elust*.

The poetry award went to **Triin Soomets** for the collection of poems *Asjade omadused* (Features of things).

The drama award was given to **Mart Aas** for his play *Äralennuväli*.

**Anti Saar** received the award in children's literature for his book *Kuidas meil asjad käivad* (How things are done here).

The best essay prize went to **Ilmar Vene** for his books *Irooniline kolmainsus Hando Runneli mõtlemisviisi taustal* (Ironic trinity against the background of Hanno Runnel) and *Kaugenemised: täheldusi Karl Ristikivist* (Notes on Karl Ristikivi).

The award for translating from a foreign language into Estonian was given to **Veronika Einberg** for translating Boriss Akunin's *Must linn* (The black city), Andrei Ivanov's *Harbini ööliblikad* (Harbin's moths) and Mihhail i kin's *Kiri sinule* (Letter to you) from Russian.

**Jean-Pierre Minaudier** received the award for translating Estonian literature into a foreign language. He translated Andrus Kivirähk's novel *Mees, kes teadis ussisõnu* (The man who spoke Snakish) into French.

The jury also gave an award outside the genre specification, this time to **Valdur Mikita** for his *Lingvistiline mets: tsibihärblase paradigma. Teadvuse kiirendi* (The linguistic forest).

The awards for literature in Russian were received by **Andrei Ivanov** for his novel *Harbini ööliblikad* (Harbin moths) and **Igor Kotjuh** for his collection of poetry *Eesti disain* (Estonian design).

The award for best article was given to **Katre Talviste** for her article *Luuletusi loomadest* (Poems about animals).

The 2012 Betti Alver award, given every year for a remarkable debut, was received by **Helen Kallaste** for her collection of poetry *Kogutud hetked* (Collected moments).

The 2013 Friedebert Tuglas short story award was given to **Maarja Kangro** for her short story *Atropose Opel Meriva* and to **Madis Kõiv** for his short story *Vikat* (Scythe).

The Tammsaare award is given each year for a work about today's world or a work tackling the life and work of A. H. Tammsaare. In 2013, **Avo Kull** received the Albu Parish literary award for his novel *Reporter*.

The Eduard Vilde Award of Vinni Parish for the best literary work that follows Eduard Vilde's traditions went to **Elo-Maria Roots** for the novel for young adults *Vaimude jaam* (Station of ghosts).

The Virumaa literary award is given for the best artistic interpretation of the history of the Estonian people in poetry, prose or drama. In 2013 it went to **Kristiina Ehin** for her *Paleontoloogi päevaraamat* (Paleontologist's Diary) and **Valdur Mikita** for *Lingvistiline mets* (The linguistic forest).

The Võru County government issues the Bernard Kangro award for authors from Võrumaa, connected with it or for a work dealing with Võrumaa-related topics. This time the winner was **Ulis Guth's** novel *Ärapööratud*.

The Jaan Kross literary award is issued by the Jaan Kross Foundation with the aim of recognising remarkable literary achievement in areas associated with a writer's diverse creative work, which display ethical and

aesthetic standards typical of Kross's own work. The award went to **Juhani Salokannel** for translating A. H. Tammsaare's novel *Tõde ja õigus* (Truth and Justice) into Finnish.

The Juhani Liiv Award goes to the best Estonian-language poem published for the first time during the last year, and is awarded by Alatskivi Parish, together with the Alatskivi Secondary School and Liiv Museum. The winner was **Lauri Sommer's poem** \*\*\* *Väikeste sammudega, hangeveertesse komistades...* (\*\*\*)in small steps, stumbling against snow drifts).

Another poetry award, named after Gustav Suits, has been given since 2004 by the Tartu city government and the Cultural Endowment of Tartu and is given to a poet who, during the past year, published at least one excellent, philosophically profound collection of poetry. In 2013 the award went to **Mathura's** collection of poetry *Käe all voolav joon* (Line flowing underneath the hand).

The Tallinn University Literary Award was established in 2007 with the aim of acknowledging and introducing Estonian authors who study or teach at Tallinn University or have graduated from it. In 2013 the winner was **Mariilin Vassenin** for her collection of poetry *Horror vacui*, **Marek Tamm** for compiling *Keskaja kirjanduse antoloogia I* (Anthology of medieval literature I) and **Elli Feldberg** for the Buddhist work *Meel ongi Buddha. Mazu jutlused ja ütlused* (The mind is Buddha. Mazu's sermons and sayings) from classical Chinese.

In 2007, the literary festival Prima Vista established the literary award *Esimene samm* (The first step) with the aim of encouraging Estonian literary life. The jury gives the award to the best literary debut text published in print. In 2013 the winner was **Erki Lind** and his short story *Eksisin metsa* (I got lost in the forest).

# Ülo Mattheus

## on his path to loving kindness

b y K e r t i T e r g e m

**Ülo Mattheus belongs to the rare species of contemplative intellectuals who cherish more than anything else a kind human heart and ethical mind. He is driven by an urge to become a better person, and to improve the world along the way. His most powerful tool is the word, the written word to be more exact, although he has been a celebrated radio journalist for quite some time. He has made a living as a journalist for many decades and dipped into politics as a press counsellor to the Estonian parliament, but his true vocation is that of a writer.**

A brilliant short story writer, Ülo Mattheus has won the Fr. Tuglas Short Story Prize twice. The title of his outstanding, prize-winning short story 'Playing the Buddha with Borges at 2 pm' casts light on his two paragons, one in life and the other in literature. His style of writing is often dreamlike and film-like; one of his short stories, 'The Man Named Aspelund', has also been made into a film.

His first novel, *Glow (Kuma)*, appeared in 1989 on the waves of *perestroika*, having been locked away in a publisher's drawer for two years. It is a Scandinavian-style saga unfolding in a seaside town, and is the only one of his novels translated into a foreign language — until now, that is. It was published in Germany in 1997 under the title *Der Schein*, and German critics dubbed the author 'the Estonian Kafka', apparently due to the sombre tone that runs throughout the book. The novel alternates between dreams and reality, the

conscious and the subconscious — in short, demonstrating that everything we consider real actually exists in our minds only. While exploring the human mind and consciousness, Ülo Mattheus is one of those authors who rewrites the same book throughout his life, whether in the form of a novel, a short story or an essay. From this Viking legend, he then turned towards the East, and in his subsequent books has explored Buddhist myths and symbolism. His next novel, *Goes and does not Stop*, appeared seven years later and took its inspiration from the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*.

After the launch of the German translation of his first novel at the Leipzig Book Fair, and having received the most prestigious Estonian literary award for his second one, Ülo Mattheus admitted that his ambition was to take his writing to a more philosophical level, but he feared that by doing so he would lose his readers. His typical reader is more sophisticated than the average peruser, having a broader world outlook, interested in the same philosophical issues and willing to grasp the Buddhist understanding of life and death. Nevertheless, all his novels are enjoyable reading even without any knowledge of Eastern philosophy.

*Goes and does not Stop* (*Läheb ega peatu*, 1996) was met with a mixed response from critics. There were those who were unable or unwilling to recognize the philosophical depths of the novel and those who, on the contrary, sang praises to the theme and shrugged off the textual shortcomings. Estonia is a small nation and the prototypes for many characters are easily recognizable; thus it is hard to build up a purely fictional yet true-to-life protagonist without making it a caricature. The main character, Ignat, perishes under a toppled bookshelf in the first pages of the novel and what follows is his reflections on his life during the period between his passing away and rebirth. The key to reading this book from the Buddhist perspective is provided in the epigraph, which comes from the *Tibetan Book of the*

*Dead*, but even if the reader doesn't understand this clue, the story is accessible as a recollection of the life of a human being facing death, which so abruptly cuts his mortal thread.

Being ready for an unexpected moment of death is something one needs to train for because, as Buddhists believe, what is reborn is our consciousness, or state of mind, at the moment of the demise of our earthly body. Ülo Mattheus says that for him writing is a form of contemplation: while writing he can see exactly where he stands on his path of becoming a better person and in his preparation for leaving this body when his time comes. It is also a way of focusing; focusing his thoughts toward a positive state of mind.

With each of his succeeding novels, Ülo Mattheus has grown deeper and more intriguing, delving into the mysteries of living and dying. In personal crises, he does not press the panic button but starts a new book to explore the unknown: hence the long intervals between his novels.

In 2002 he bought a one-way ticket to India and spent three months in Dharamsala in the middle of the Tibetan colony around the residential monastery of the Dalai Lama. Determined to stay on the Path but yearning for his new love, who had encouraged him to take this trip to the country of his solitary soul, he took to writing letters to her. Sometimes power cuts swallowed the texts he was typing in a local cyber café, but he knew what he needed to say. He adopted the position of a guru towards his beloved because the lady was not satisfied with ready-made answers but demanded explanations instead. The woman he loved had a mind sharper than he had expected: a dull mind would not have intrigued him anyway. So it became a didactic romance, a novel in letters, pure and sincere, carried by a desire for understanding, and called *The Love of India* (*India armastus*, 2006). It can be read as a bunch of love letters but it is

also a nice introduction to Buddhist thinking. It touches upon all the author's favourite topics, such as life, death, love and time, and reveals the sources of many of the stories he exploits in his next novel.

Four years later two books of essays followed, one of them a collection called *A Holiday of Beautiful Things (Ilusate asjade püha, 2010)*. The other one, which comes closer to being a novella, is an extraordinary piece of writing that borrows its title directly from the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, in Tibetan it is *Bardo thödol*, which translates as *Liberation through Hearing (Vabanemine kuulmise läbi, 2011)*. It is an autobiographical essay with the subtitle *Recollections of Death*, in which the author returns to his early childhood encounters with the phenomena that encouraged Prince Gautama to seek enlightenment 2,500 years ago in India. Ülo Mattheus had an accident climbing Mont Blanc in 2004; he slipped and fell into a glacier crevasse. Luckily he was rescued and transported to a hospital, where beautiful French attendants nursed him back to life. The Tibetan *Bardo thödol* is a book of guidance that is read aloud to the deceased for 49 days after their passing to help them keep track in the intermediate (*bardo*) period, when they leave their bodies and prepare to inhabit new ones, or prepare for liberation from the cycle of rebirth. Ülo Mattheus adds a personal touch to this somewhat mystic funeral text. He has escaped, he has seen the light and he knows and wants others to know how important it is to strive for a lucid and luminous mind.

Ülo Mattheus had not had enough of this topic, and so he exploited it once again in his latest novel *His Secret Prayer (Tema salajane palve, 2013)*. Like the previous work, this novel was nominated for the highest annual literary prize in its genre. He was a nominee but not a winner, which may have been due to the fact that, although outstanding, his work transcends the frames of conventional literature when compared to

his fellow authors. This latest novel can be compared to *Daimón* by Abel Posse, or *The Mandala of Sherlock Holmes* by Jamyang Norbu, and its magical realism could easily be classified as suspense or even science fiction, although from a Buddhist perspective it is simply a classic story of kindness, love and compassion. The cover blurb says that the author breaks the frames of time and space, but it would be more accurate to say that he does not set frames on time and space. The characters are simultaneously in Estonia and the Himalayas, and move between the worlds of the living and the dead. Time is not linear: everything happens at the same moment. The protagonist, a reincarnated lama who is not aware of this state, is in possession of a secret prayer that can bring a young woman back to life from the comatose intermediate period. Thus the prayer is something that has power, but power is implicitly dangerous. It does not matter what your tool is: what matters is how you use it. This book is beautiful and purifying, the mystical appearances are described in a lovingly humorous manner, and it has a finely crafted, uplifting ending. It leaves a positive imprint on the mind of the aware reader.

Whereas in *Goes and does not Stop* Mattheus was engaged in a philosophical search, trying to find a teacher, in his latest novel he seems to have sorted out almost everything, with the possible exception of love, which still needs further exploration. He has mastered a style of writing that impresses and, although none of us is perfect, he keeps climbing the path of perfection as an essayist, novelist and human being. He says he is a world reformer by nature who believes we can teach ourselves to become better people, and has therefore travelled far and wide to learn how to do this.



# Short Outlines of Books by Estonian

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

Carolina Pihelgas

## **Kiri kodust**

(A Letter from Home)

Tallinn: Eesti Keele Sihtasutus, 2014. 74 pp

ISBN 9789985795590

The poet and translator Carolina Pihelgas (b. 1986) has for a year been the driving force behind a young authors' literary magazine, she has an MA in religious studies and the anthropology of religion, she has won a research article prize for her paper on folk religion, and she has won renown as a poet. Her scope is wide and her method is based on her broad and varied conception of the world: her poetry reflects her mentality and principles, as well as her inner wisdom and determination. Her previous collection of poetry, *Õnnekangestus* (2011), contained her own works and her translations of Tomas Tranströmer's, Tor Ulven's, Stein Mehren's and Jaume Subirana's poems. Here we can see how translating naturally provides inspiration, widens the context surrounding the translator's own work and broadens her view of the world. Translating the works of authors who are important to the translator adds new connections and explanatory and strengthening layers to the inner aspects of her own poetry and her lyrical self-awareness.

In her fourth collection of poems, *Kiri kodust*, Pihelgas continues writing in her established distinctive style. Her poetry is characterised by a quiet, slightly meditative and peaceful mood, and an extremely clear and precise, but minimalist and simple form of expression. However, her poetry is now much more focussed on perception, and her previous poetry of being on a journey has been replaced by the poetry of being stationary and by "wordless solitude": a lyrical self that has found a comfortable and safe nest ("the war is raging somewhere else") has been able to assume the contemplative, detail-centred and delving-into-deep-meanings position of a bystander. "Recently, I watch everything / as if from a distance. Through a window, / from a heated room, slightly drowsy from winter." The lyrical self's field of vision is full of transformations and brightness, but each detail or moment that catches her attention somehow stands at some distance, and the lyrical self follows everything without interfering, standing apart. With her focussed inner conviction and judgement, she positions the moments captured in her poems in a barely recognisable but still firm conceptual framework. As a result, she seems to create a wall of yawning indifference around herself in order to study silence and to discover some

# Authors

u s , M a r e t V a h e r a n d J a n i k a K r o n b e r g



Carolina Pihelgas (Photo by Scanpix)

philosophical sense in the “slow emptiness of days”.

The views and impressions revealed in this collection of poetry are sensitive but aloof; the images of nature and depictions of changing seasons and passing years are full of snowy and drowsy moods. Winter and snow were prevalent images in her previous poetry collection *Õnnekangestus*, but now the snow marks a living softness, the serenity of the northern climate, and the awe of untouched purity (“The snow has shaped trees into gateways. / But there are no footprints in the wood. / I, too, will refrain from going there.”), while drawing attention to contrasts. Despite drowsiness, the viewing of open spaces also indicates her sharpness in noticing something special and unavoidable and examining both the present and the past. The images surfacing in her mind are interpreted from a state of aloofness, but all the experienced landscapes and journeys are still present in memory and they have retained their brightness; even things in the shade “have the right of shining afar / and hollow like the windows of / a courtyard house. Still meant for somebody”. Although the feelings expressed in the book are based on emptiness and silence, the “somebody” who might see the brightness of hidden details or forgotten shadows is still

strongly present in Pihelgas's poetry. Often her poems address an abstract and always silent partner: the lyrical self talks to "you", someone who remains vague, mysterious and incomprehensible; a similar feature can be found in her previous poetry collection. In such a way, Pihelgas creates attractive tensions between an uncomfortable state, distance and coldness, and inexpressible intimacy.

The tension that is launched in Pihelgas's poetry flows into lightness and freedom. The way of thinking that emerges from the stillness, emptiness, yearning and silence aims for moments "when/ the consciousness is empty and clear:/ without memories and lies — light." *Kiri kodust* is an alluringly wise and well-composed poetry collection. Compared with her earlier books, it contains fewer doubts and hesitant questions and much more steadfastness and resolution. Moving forward is assured, as "We learn all through our lives: how to be with people/ and how to be alone. All through/ our lives we learn to know ourselves."BM

Lauri Pilter

### **Chorus of Boos and Other Stories**

Tallinn: Tuum, 2014. 152 pp.  
ISBN 9789949948260

Perhaps the newest trend in Estonian prose is writing about peripheral settlements, their landscapes and inhabitants, mainly through documentary and autobiographical incidences. Tõnu Õnnepalu has been pursuing this line for some time, as has Andrus Kasemaa, with his poetic world, especially in his prose book *The Lost World of Widows* (2012), which describes a certain place via special details, events and objects in the everyday life of a number of village widows. Other established writers have also tried writing about their home territories through their own mythologies and autobio-

graphies, e.g. Lauri Sommer, whose latest work, *Beyond the Swamp* (2014), is in a sense Estonia's own Walter Benjamin childhood, which opens through urban landscapes. The literary historian, translator and writer Lauri Pilter (born 1971) also maps autobiographical peripheral landscapes. The focus of his collection of stories *Chorus of Boos and Other Stories* is somewhat different from the above-mentioned books. Here the focus is not on the "self" or the narrator, although the latter is clearly and recognisably autobiographical. Instead, the narrator's aim is to tell about others, to "write about people who lived back then and who live here now", painting brief pictures of the everyday life of people who, for some reason, stand out. Through the landscapes and community of the periphery, however, the childhood and younger years of a boy named Larats gradually emerge. A kind of childhood tale then.

*A Dragonish Cloud* (2004), Pilter's first novel, or "a novel in short stories", which examines *idées fixe*, madness, love and the Jewish question, received a debut award, and the writer was called a great stylist, and compared with world classics. The beautifully written debut novel, "where life imitates art, and not the other way round", as a reviewer remarked, was praised as one of the most significant books in the Estonian literature of the 2000s. Pilter's second novel, the eclectic, weird and introspective *A Trip to Rahemägi* (2010), was somewhat mysterious to readers. His next work, *Orless on the Funicular* (2012), was published in Charleston, USA, and has not attracted serious attention at home.

Pilter's fourth work in Estonian, and therefore inevitably remarkable, *Chorus...* contains 24 short stories or miniatures plus two poems, and shows the author as a master of the short form. The plot unravels on a peninsula called Airootsi. The toponymous site is not far removed from real geography: the fictional location of Airootsi is easily recognisable as the Noarootsi peninsula in the western part of Estonia, a former settlement of coastal Sweden, which is also Pilter's own place of childhood and where he has his summer home.

Airootsi is described as a vague hinterland, as if non-existent, as its outline cannot quite be determined. It used to be an island, which then gradually grew together with the mainland; the landscape still shows traces of being separated from the sea a long time ago. During the Soviet era, the whole area was a rigidly guarded border zone, where access was only possible with an official permit: such conditions strengthen a location's peripheral character and determine the development of the inhabitants. However, the place was "charming, as it had always been a hinterland of hinterlands, viewed from whichever cardinal point." The writer has now put this charm into words, describing sensitively and in great detail the peninsula's geography, nobler nature, subjectively significant forest paths, the quietly lapping sea nearby and the winter ice roads across it, neighbouring overgrown orchards and how people happened to come here and why some left.

Local people are indeed crucial. "One nice summer day, Larats cycled from his farm to the cemetery to look at the graves of people who filled his youthful memories." Thus starts the landscape mapping that branches off into portrait stories. Pilter's debut work was very autobiographical, whereas here the biographical level differs from the previous one because the emphasis is not on the spiritual life of the protagonist. Instead, the author produces vivid, warm, sincere, emphatic and affectionate little pictures of various villagers, "straightforward

people", who "had lived and worked, bearing their burdens and trying to hold their heads up." A heavy-drinking unemployed neighbour, a waterman, a mushroom man, a tailor, a resourceful old woman and Larats's own parents – through their everyday lives and events we learn about the history, changing landscapes, everyday problems and customs of a small rural place. Pilter has enough sense of style to respectfully describe skills that have almost totally disappeared (e.g. using a scythe).

Urban life evokes feelings such as "a sense of emptiness in civilisation, poverty of incidents, a shortage of different identities", whereas in *Chorus...* "the everyday life of the little peripheral village seems quite opposite: sparkling and rich." By blending sensitively recorded details, a grand image emerges of a seemingly waning world, especially hopeless in winter, which is nevertheless estimable and is kept alive by this book.BM

Lauri Sommer

## **Beyond the Swamp**

Tallinn: Menu, 2014. 270 pp.

ISBN 9789949495931

*Beyond the Swamp*, the third prose book by Lauri Sommer (born 1973), a writer, literary historian and musician, is a notional sequel to his previous novel, which recorded the life of a family in southern Estonia through its landscapes. The writer researched the family tree on his mother's side and focuses on memory pictures of the time spent at his granny's in the country. *Beyond the Swamp*, as the writer confirmed in an interview, tells more about his father, because without his father he would never have found the landscapes described in the book, landscapes which formed a significant background to Sommer's boyhood development. The book reveals Sommer's childhood in a small Estonian town, his home town of Viljandi, as

Lauri Pilter (Photo by Scanpix)



well as the neighbouring area, an inspiring playground or simply a place for reflection. This is a genuine biographical piece about landscapes, where truth is confirmed by photographs, excerpts from old newspapers relying on other secondary sources, and his grandfather's memoirs in manuscript, emails and oral heritage.

Sommer records history of several kinds: how landscapes were shaped, actions of melioration, the emergence of streams and the resulting lakes, changing urban plans, the building of houses and the everyday life of various institutions. The human story is closely blended in, reaching further than simple personal family tales, childhood playmates and other close friends. The book, for example, describes patients of a nearby psychiatric hospital, and a few peculiar local or remarkable people from history. In addition there is a story of subcultural movement connected with music and drugs in the last decades of 20th century Viljandi, which belonged to a stage in the writer's life. Sommer also links incidents from his early childhood years, his first words and intellectual development with observations of his small daughter's everyday life and development. This emotional framework connects two places, Räästu from the previous book, where the writer currently lives and is raising his daughter, and his childhood Viljandi. Traces of memory in landscape come to life again in the writer's everyday environment.

Sommer not only writes about what he has seen with his own eyes, but also uses historical documents, writings about the history of culture and recollections of others. The objective and the highly personal intertwine to form a balanced unity: into general descriptions the writer inserts his own sensual wanderings in a space formed entirely of his own memories, so the "memory landscape blends into dreams". In later instances, the town only appears in brief flashes and within a vague framework,



Lauri Sommer (Photo by Scanpix)

leaving a perception of the world based on nature's primeval and mystical power. *Beyond...* contains spirituality resting on and wandering through dreamy landscape and regional poetry, but also the surrounding atmosphere exerts an inevitable influence on the development of an individual, evoking respect for natural impunity and peace.

Under the shadow of geographical poetry, an inner world acquires a backdrop of landscape and the described objects, paths, views and moments are all "a blotch on the inner map that fills with warmth, forming a singular world." Lauri Pilter's little stories start at a cemetery, just as Sommer's thoughts and memories finally lead him to a cemetery. A cemetery, after all, is just another zone of life. BM

Andra Teede  
**Ühe jalaga põhjas**

(One Foot in the North)  
 Tallinn: Kite, 2013. 56 pp  
 ISBN 9789949944439

The collection of poetry *Ühe jalaga põhjas*, full of Nordic freshness, mostly deals with the discovering of the self and the surrounding world during journeys into the Arctic Circle. The polar iciness is softened by the power of love that sends a young woman in search of her true self. Calling her outer

shell, her outer image, a “human-like object”, she attempts to balance the clash between the outer, seemingly persistent activities and her inner self. The development of feelings and the soul world lead to further aims and destinations in real life, reaching the enjoyment of extreme situations, whether a polar day on the icy shore of the Barents Sea or the “torrential downpour of the century”. And this unavoidable and essential theme of love and nearness to somebody also suggests something extreme. In the fifth collection of poetry of the young author Andra Teede (b. 1988), *Ühe jalaga põhjas*, the sensing of social and natural conditions of geographical locations is correlated with the self-cognisance of the lyrical self and the expression of emotions (“the air is like that / that you fall in love as soon as / you leave your house”); changes in landscapes are reflected in changes in the soul and vice versa.

Last spring, Teede graduated from the Drama School of the Estonian Academy of Music and Theatre as a dramatist. Dramatic features also characterise her poetry, which, however, avoids theatricality. She expresses strong feelings in a natural way without pretence; the whole collection, with all its private features, is believably lifelike, even

when its occasional melancholy and sad undertones are undermined by ironic flutters (e.g. “project-based life” and “project-based love”). But even these features appear to be real, because all the experienced moments bring out certain moods that are expressed directly and honestly; the believably realistic basis of the poems is quite loquaciously shaped into poetic form: Teede’s train of thought is quite long.

Teede has softened; compared to her earlier work, she has become much more balanced and meek (“I am the one who is silent”), as well as more mature and with a more developed style. In this new book, Teede has developed further the quietly observant lyrical image and central theme of her previous collection of poems, *Käigud (Comings and Goings)* (2011): against the background of comings and goings, leavings and changing reflections of the environment, we are constantly aware of two aspects: an expectation, and the love and nearness that support the existence of human beings. These two deeply emotional aspects are mixed together in a fitting and interesting way that can especially clearly be seen in the poem “About the Women of a Kind and about their Love”. The poem describes the endless yearning and waiting of sailors’ women, full of love, which culminates in the expectation of the abstract and uncertain waiting for whatever may happen: “What feeling is it / when you are waiting for this waiting / that is at the same time the waiting of yours only / and the whole world’s.” Teede understands and values this condition and the feelings and desperation that are born of it: “But I have waited for this waiting/ and this kind of waiting/ is the only one of its kind / the feeling that leaves you/ with a cup cooling in your hand and the time rolling behind your window.”

Roaming through foreign countries also gives rise to questions concerning nationalities and languages: how can a nation of a million people persist? How can she make

Andra Teede (Photo by Scanpix)



herself and her problems understood in a foreign country? Self-reflections and search for self, enhanced by travels through the polar day, in the Scandinavian countries, in Siberia and other places, as well as the observation and analysing of foreign people, ultimately lead to the wisdom of experiences that will fit things together so that finding answers to the questions of how to be happy and how to contain oneself is not too hard. But we need to be alert, because this poet does things on purpose. Her book ends with the panorama of the Stockholm Central Station: "this is a total parade/ that gets past me at the rush hour / they do naturally not know / how special they are how important are all these times when / you step on and off the train during your lifetime / how obvious is the fact that in the corner there is always sitting / some estonian poet who writes everything down." BM

Jaak Jõerüüt (Photo by Teet Malsroos/Õhtuleht)



## Jaak Jõerüüt **Raisakullid III-IV**

(Vultures III-IV)

Eesti Keele Sihtasutus. Tallinn. 2014. 310 pp  
ISBN: 9789985795811

In 1982 the then still young author Jaak Jõerüüt (b. 1947) published his first novel, *Raisakullid* (*Vultures*). Its second volume appeared in 1985 and now, almost thirty years later, we can read the third and fourth volumes of the book.

It is not too common that after many years an author continues a past work. Usually, sequels to books and further sequels to sequels are written immediately, when there is still demand for new developments, and very often each of the following volumes tends to be weaker than the previous one.

This is not the case with *Raisakullid*. The new volume seems to be even more interesting than the previous ones, and the present book transforms the first volumes, giving them a different effect than they had at the time of their publication. Everything has changed: the state, the system of government, the society and the author. Jõerüüt, who started his literary career as a poet, has published both prose and poetry, has been involved in politics, has worked as a minister and has been an ambassador of the Estonian Republic in several countries; at present, he is the Estonian Ambassador in Sweden.

*Raisakullid* can be treated as a belletristic study of characters that represent different and opposite ways of life of the society they live in: the first two volumes are about the stagnating Soviet society of the 1970s and 1980s. Of the central characters, Max Savi is a gifted practical adapter with ambitions to power; he is well-adjusted to the rules and opportunities of Soviet society. He is opposed by the shy, impractical and dreamy literary scholar Paul

Annist. Both of them are representational figures of their social strata. "Paul's ego was plaintively yearning for inner harmony", while Max felt "as if he was physically stuck in his place". The stories of impractical Paul and slick but capable Max play out side by side. Both men have wives: Paul's is the elfish and ethereal Ruth, and Max's is the cold beauty Merle. Honest and dutiful Paul lives in a basement flat, which ruins his health. In order to get a flat in the capital city, one had to wait for decades or have the right contacts, and it was still a lottery. Therefore, Paul's housing troubles have a certain social critical dimension. All kinds of events in relation to obtaining a flat carry the intrigue of the first parts of the novel and bring us tidings of the strange customs and practices of the lost times.

The author is, naturally, biased towards Paul, who also has an important role in the following volumes, set in 1989-1991, the time of the Singing Revolution. But the most important character seems to be the author, the invisible narrator. The book opens with the words of the narrator, "People had lined up, side by side and shoulder to shoulder". It seems that the events are described and commented on by the voice of history itself, which distinguishes between good and evil and talks about events that have not yet taken place. Historical events form the plot of the book, and the author has selected his characters for the stage of history. An important role in the third and fourth volumes of the novel is played by Karl Tallo, who gets around in his wheelchair. The author does not hide, and in fact highlights, the fact that this character is based on a real life person, the translator Enn Soosaar.

This novel is its author's interpretation of history; its archetypal characters (besides Max and Paul) point to different options in life's lottery. Surprisingly, Max is not able to appreciate the turn of history and cannot choose among new opportunities, but his ex-wife Merle adapts well to new conditions; several other characters are numb with astonishment. Only Karl, chained to his

wheelchair, is a free agent, capable of interpreting and finding sense in the events that shook society. The Singing Revolution and Estonia's liberation process have not been covered much in fiction. Jõerüüt's panorama, presented through different human types, is an artistic and trustworthy image of this period. The first volumes of *Raisakullid* have been given a deserving finale. RH

Mari Vallisoo

### **Viimäne vihm**

(The Last Rain)

Tartu, Ilmamaa, 2014 103 pp

ISBN: 9789985774830

*Viimäne vihm* is Mari Vallisoo's tenth collection of poetry, and was published posthumously. The poet did not see the book: Mari Vallisoo (1950-2013) tragically lost her life in a traffic accident. She had already compiled the first draft of the book, but could not actually complete the manuscript.

Vallisoo has won several poetry awards, and is considered to have been one of the great Estonian women poets. As a person, she was extremely unpretentious, known by only a few friends, and the power of her voice was mostly heard in her verses. Her poetry has been described as ballad-like and "singing". She found her subjects and inspirations in her home region of Kodavere, on the shore of Lake Peipsi, on the eastern edge of Estonia.

*Viimäne vihm* contains Vallisoo's poetry in the dialect of her home area. (The richness of the small Estonian language can be seen in its large number of dialects, which are divided into smaller sub-dialects.) Some Estonian poets write all their works in dialect, which lends additional value to their verses; some poets use dialect only now and then. Vallisoo was in the latter group.

A person learns a dialect in childhood; even if it does not differ much from the common literary language, it still takes the person to a more intimate personal world. The dialect reminds its speakers of their childhood, and at the end of the childhood many people grow out of it. Dialects are at least not frowned upon any more, as was common some time ago.

In her dialect poems, Mari Vallisoo, too, returns to her childhood home village and creates small specific pictures and images, portrays some "old hag" or discovers some unexpected still life scenes. She intertwines her verses with motifs from folk songs or uses form elements of folk songs. Some memories can even be unexpectedly satirical. While Vallisoo's poems have generally been characterised as tender and fragile, her verses in dialect are quite tough and spirited, and are sometimes even tricky and contain doggerel. Her dialect poetry opens up a whole small world, with its natural processes and activities. It may be more down-to-earth than her work in general, but the words of the poet bring an eternal element even to the mundane. RH

Taavi Jakobson

## **Töeline jumalaosake**

(A Real Particle of God)

Pilgrim 2014

"His choice is simple: to admit to the whole world that the gobon is complete codswallop and he has been making a fool of them all for years ... or to allow this craze to spread at will."

The first sentence in the book introduces everything that the reader might find and what might happen next: a funny and exciting read. The young and talented doctor of physics Elton Kobar has been meaning for some time to publish an article in his own field in the ordinary press, as a counterweight to numerous sensation-flavoured writings, where the authors and editors focus on scandals and not scientific precision. However, Elton cannot publish his article before he has invented a strange "gobon", with the ability to somehow twist and bend reality. Elton finds inspiration in recent research in physics and his idea of what might be intriguing. He finds the name for



the research object on a packet of Chinese condoms. Once published, the article unexpectedly attracts keen interest among the general public, faithful supporters emerge, and funding flows from the European Union. There is also a scandal-seeking journalist and his boss, who wants him to lead a work group to research the gobon.

The introduction, with its comic tone, makes the reader hope to be entertained, by following the increasingly helpless attempts of the main character to solve the problems he has inflicted on himself in an absurd situation. At the same time, the author, just like the mysterious character in the novel PR (the initials refer to both a job and a name), firmly leads the inventor of the gobon into more complicated situations where it becomes increasingly clear that nothing is quite as simple as it seems. The gobon thus gathers fame, refusing to be influenced by any attempts by Elton to get rid of his dangerous invention. Paradoxically, the gobon may actually turn out to be real. In the end, even Elton himself cannot be certain whether the event that motivated the publishing of the article in the first place — a bet with a friend — actually happened or not. Wracked with doubts, he seeks help from other people, without realising that the gobon has already bent people's reality. Everyone seems to be gripped by the gobon craze: ordinary people, for whom Elton is a superstar, members of the research group, who consider him to be a genius, and the Order of Holy Sirius, which is trying to unite science and religion by worshipping the gobon.

The avalanche unleashed by Elton is so powerful that nothing can stop the process, and even the inventor of the gobon is unable to change the course of events. The increasingly powerful elementary particle seems to start fighting against Elton himself, trying to eliminate this insignificant cog in a bigger game who has fulfilled his task and is now no longer needed. Whoever does not believe in the gobon may even be breaking

the law. No-one except Elton, however, is bothered by the changed reality and everyone has his own explanation. "The fact that the gobon's immense and deep knowledge decided to reveal itself through you does not make you a messiah. You are just a means in the huge machine," concludes Kaur, the order master. "The fact that you fabricated the gobon, as it were, does not mean that another particle with more or less the same characteristics does not actually exist," explains the docent Pärn, Elton's former supervisor and currently almost a homeless tramp. The docent hints at a secret project which Elton has inadvertently completed.

The gobon bends the reality of all the characters in the novel, making them act as puppets, who for some reason believe that they are free to make their own decisions, whereas they in fact serve higher powers. Nobody has any idea what powers these could be or what their motives are. Thus the gobon, initially invented as an innocent joke, turns out to be a dangerous and almighty particle, which indeed passes through people and bends reality, just as Elton first claimed. What Elton does not grasp is that he may have hit upon the original cause of the universe, and it depends on the gobon, as befits the God particle, what destiny is awaiting Elton. Everything is possible and nothing in the progression of incredible events seems improbable.

The reader of this novel will often laugh at the absurd incidents and realistically depicted characters, as well as current topics in the media, politics and science. The author describes every area of activity and the inner lives of his characters with sparkling humour and deep understanding, using fluent language and captivating narrative skills. In a book peppered with comic situations, the reader might start pondering questions that have captured people's imaginations from times immemorial: is everything determined or do we possess free will in our largely absurd world?

It is not easy to say whether the novel is science fiction, comic, adventurous, social-critical or philosophical. It is all of them rolled together, offering entertainment, references to popular culture and the joy of recognition, as well as sadness and timeless questions. It is up to the reader to decide what to focus on. MV

Kaur Riismaa

## **Teekond päeva lõppu**

(A Journey to the End of the Day)

Tallinn: Nõo Kirik, 2014. 64 pp

ISBN 9789949946556

When Kaur Riismaa (b. 1986) published his first collection of poetry a few years ago, critics stated that each of his poems is worth a novel, considering their length, narrative potential and substantial dimension. Riismaa has studied semiotics, theology and dramaturgy; he is a freelance poet, but has also written plays and short prose. The young poet works with a truly giddy élan: in three years he has managed to publish five poetry collections and has, thus, become a phenomenon in Estonian literature. The length of his poems has jokingly been called a kind of a creative yardstick: who can write as long a poem as Riismaa's? At the same time, his creative zeal displays no signs of dangerous and superficial loquacity. Riismaa does not know exaggeration and excess; all his words and phrases are precise and meaningful. He has characterised his poetic capability as a creative combination of fervour and discipline.

Riismaa's fifth poetry collection, *Teekond päeva lõppu*, contains texts from late 2013 and early 2014. It was composed as a journey, vibrating on the border between the real and the dreamy, to the end of a poetic day through three time zones, which are

called, following their temporal aspect, a "dream day", "waiting for the evening" or "the moment between the day and the evening", and "night life". This day develops into an existential, but playful mosaic, where the lyrical self can take different shapes and its poetic monologues are delivered from the accordant point of view. Such changing points of view are familiar to readers from Riismaa's first collection, published in 2011, where his poems presented life stories of fictional people from their own points of view. Over time, the importance of historical breaking points and collective memory has been reduced and these transformations, or "trans-enthusings" as the poet calls them, have shown their increasing personal and intimate warmth.

However, besides subjective observations, Riismaa presents humane and empathic reflections and images of all kinds of phenomena, up to the evolution of nature and mankind. The poetic passion and the

Kaur Riismaa (Photo by Scanpix)



form of expression of a singular observer keen on intimate details and habits of common life are developed into an overall open-hearted perception of the world. The real and dreamy lazing about can contain and describe immediate and realistic human relations, ambivalent conditions, individual emotions, issues of existence and closeness/solitude, as well as unexpected new turns. These lyrical lives and “obtained shapes and images” can merge; the person appearing in dreams may be only a delicate quiver in the void that echoes the thoughts of the lyrical self. Riismaa’s messages do not fade into the void; on the contrary, they radiate existential power. Riismaa even touches upon the “vitality of Estonianness”, and talks about the “new lost generation”: the people who have run to foreign countries in search of better jobs.

Riismaa tests the possibilities of poetic language and the limits of word power and creates new worlds. These new worlds open up as a rich and diverse assemblage, the most interesting aspects of which are the recognition of situations that offer synaesthetic experiences, glidingly erotic wordplays, transformations of social inadequacies into virtues, and clashes of the existential sad blaze with bleakness and with the balancing serene spell. Although “life is laughing” in these worlds, ambivalence has a significant role here: Riismaa’s texts clash, but also intertwine worry and joy, love and death, madness and sadness, tenderness and strictness, fear and enchantment, memory and imagination. Karl Ristikivi, an Estonian writer of the most European spirit, professed his belief in the permanence of a smile, even living in exile. Similarly, Riismaa shows how the permanent lightness of laughter can be found even in shy solitude and sadness. In his poetry, the experiences stemming from small details grow into humane reflections. BM

Ilmar Vene

## **Kaugenemised. Täheldusi Karl Ristikivi**

(Divergences. Observations on Karl Ristikivi)

Tallinn: Tuum, 2013. 261 pp

ISBN 978-9949-9482-3-9

Karl Ristikivi’s (1912-1977) works are among the most renowned Estonian literary classics. In his youth, he attracted attention with his traditional psychological development novels. While in exile in Sweden, his main work was a voluminous series of novels dealing with European history, from the Middle Ages up to the present day. Ilmar Vene (b. 1951) is currently one of the most erudite Estonian essayists; he has written numerous intellectual-historical treatments of Estonian writers, as well as of world literature, focussing on the Middle Ages in Europe. Although Ristikivi’s work also contains some modernist experiments, the mentality exhibited in the works of both men is characterised by their holding on to permanent European values and their unwillingness to give way to short-term modernisations. Thus, Vene is well-suited to deal with Ristikivi’s work.

*Kaugenemised* contains 19 essays that are, some of them more, others less noticeably, inspired by Ristikivi’s *Päeva-raamat (Diary)*, which was for a long time unavailable to readers, as it was published only in 2008, thus demonstrating Vene’s characteristic fondness for apocryphal texts. But this forms only the background, the starting point for his deep and thorough delving into Ristikivi’s whole body of literary work. Surprisingly, Vene is even interested in the debut text of the novice author, the unpretentious story “Ohver” (“Victim”), published in a newspaper in 1928, which has generally been neglected by critics and reviewers. From this piece, Vene draws a bold line to the author’s swan song *Rooma*

*päevik (The Roman Diary)* (1976), attracting readers by making a connection that indicates the perfectly executed circle of Ristikivi's life work, despite the many faults Ristikivi himself found in the early work.

This is not a traditional monograph in the style of "life and work". Vene's book is an intellectual-historical excursion through European cultural history, starting with Plato and Christianity, which forms the background for Ristikivi's personality and his work. Vene is an intellectual historian, not someone trying to bring new facts into circulation. He is able to start and develop a whole essay from some small and almost unnoticeable moment in Ristikivi's diary. While the secularisation of Europe in modern times seems to be considered the most general background of Ristikivi's work in *Kaugenemised*, we are fascinated by Vene's ability to notice and understand true to life and mundane fine points.

As a result, we are presented with a respectful attempt at understanding Ristikivi's intellectual and spiritual world. The word "observations" in the subtitle of the book does not indicate an attempt at an exhaustive academic approach but, rather, refers to the journey of free thoughts revealed in the works and the diary of one of the most European Estonian writers. Vene's respect for Ristikivi is partly responsible for such an approach. Ristikivi, who had hidden his personal life from the public, repeatedly emphasised that his youth and development years should be ignored. Vene has usually followed these instructions, but in this book we find that the personality and creativity of Karl Ristikivi have been revealed to us in a more trustworthy and truthful way. JK

Helga Nõu  
**Mahajätja**

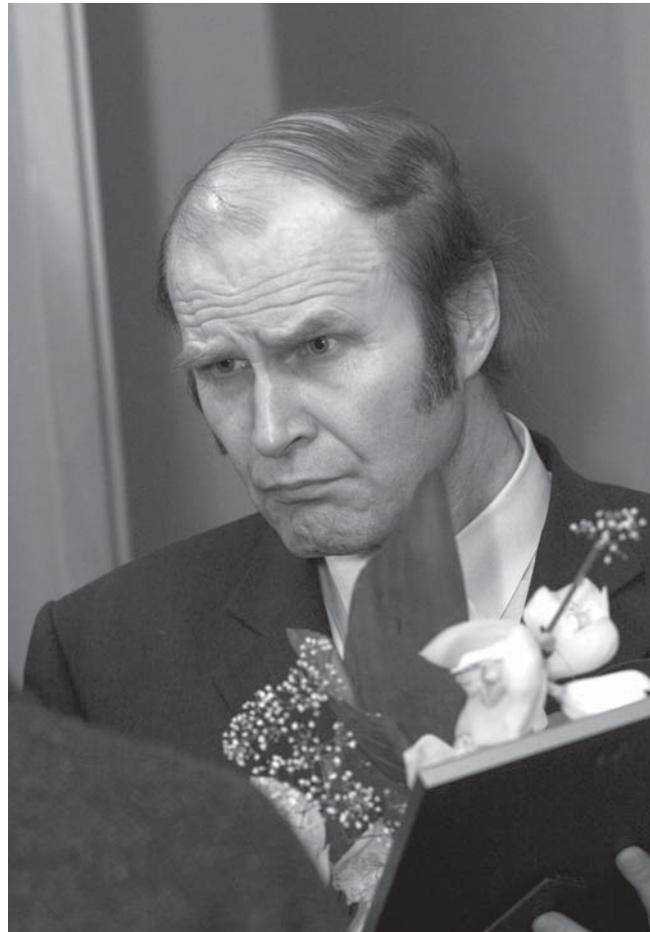
(The Abandoners)

Tallinn: Tänapäev, 2013. 284 pp

ISBN: 9789949273966

*Mahajätjad* is the eighth novel by Helga Nõu (b. 1934), who has lived in Sweden since WWII. This is also her first book that has absolutely nothing to do with the generational and otherwise distorted relationships between exile Estonians and those who remained in Estonia, which is a characteristic feature of her earlier work. The book is set in Botswana. Nõu positions her two main characters, who come from Tallinn, in the killing climate of the Kalahari Desert and confronts them with Negroid mask games that are incomprehensible to the Nordic mentality. Little by little, the reader comes to

Ilmar Vene (Photo by Scanpix)



understand that the characters are a father and a son from a family that broke apart long ago because of violent family relations. The characters realise this fact only in the course of the novel, as they have been apart for many years. The task of the Estonian characters is to shoot a photo series for an Estonian magazine and to attempt to catch the soul of Africa; however, this is quite a vague task. As the author pointedly remarks, in the 19th century, ill-equipped Dr. Livingstone knew very well what he wanted. The Estonian men have good cameras and other equipment, but they have no idea what to do with them. The shooting of a photo series in an exotic environment offers a thrilling read, but a tragic final solution arrives before the characters are fully developed. The son dies of thirst in his father's embrace under the scorching African sun. While before the novel begins the father has abandoned his family after crippling the mother of his children, now the son abandons his father. The human relations depicted by Nõu are not elevating and the characters' recognition of each other in extreme conditions does not lead to reconciliation: the characters simply have no strength left in the end. The women, who go in search of the lost men a few years later, are more humane, perhaps because they share the gender of the author of the book. However, they remain peripheral characters who the reader does not particularly identify with.

We could say that, in addition to settling old scores and the possibility, or rather impossibility, of repairing family ties, the other main theme in *Mahajätjad* is photography. Not only because the protagonists are photographers but also because photos, in which individuals and events are recognisable, play an important role in the novel. Helga Nõu's style is photographically precise and realistic, although she describes landscapes that she has never seen in real life. Her fiction is believable: artistic truth and imagined reality become one. But the author also hints that, as the creator of the story,



Helga Nõu (Photo by Scanpix)

she has staged the whole sequence of events and her characters could as well be living a new life in Botswana. Having followed the path of realism, this is the moment when this well-composed novel starts to become magical, with a shower of chance events and malicious omens, because things that are impossible in life are possible in fiction. JK



K a l j u   K r u u s a   ( P h o t o   b y   S c a n p i x )