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# Noticing both the major and minor. An interview. Part 1

**Kai Aareleid** (1972) and **Veronika Kivisilla** (1978) are writers whose works have, in a way, recently debuted. Both published their first literary works in 2011: Kai the semi-autobiographical novel *Vene veri* (Russian Blood), and Veronika the poetry collection *Kallis kalender* (Dear Calendar). Before their respective releases, Kai had written short stories and translated Spanish, Portuguese, Finnish, and English literature into Estonian, while Veronika was involved in music, teaching, and storytelling. As of today, however, one can't miss how boldly both women's voices have started to ring out in Estonian literature: Veronika's third poetry collection *Cantus firmus* (2015) was nominated for the Cultural Endowment of Estonia's Award for Poetry, while Kai's second novel *Linnade põletamine* (We All Fall Down, 2016) can be regarded as one of the year's most important Estonian-language works of prose. Additionally, they are widely known for their impressive stage presence. ELM reckoned that it's the right time to have them interview each other.

## Veronika Kivisilla's questions for Kai Aareleid

**Try to remember where it all started, describe what you read as a child, and what you carry around to this day. Did you feel back then like the pencil was winking at you slyly? When were your first attempts at writing literature? Do you still have any of them, or do you have any memorized?**

Answering questions like that is always a little embarrassing. How original can anyone's response really be? Looking back, maybe only two things are worth

mentioning. Firstly, I was read to a lot as a child, and I myself became a reader at a relatively late age. I remember many situations where I was being read to, and sometimes I can recall external details, such as the lighting or background noises, much more clearly than what was being read. In hindsight, I've realized how deep an impression the memory of having someone reading aloud has left on me: I spent a lot of time in a sleepy little town in central Estonia as a child, and I can clearly picture my grandfather reading my grandmother's

KAI AARELEID · PHOTO BY HARRI A. SUNDELL



VERONIKA KIVISILLA · PHOTO BY EERO VABAMÄGI/SCANPIX



favorite books to her in bed in the evenings. My grandmother would listen and I would listen (probably not understanding all that much), and we would both fall asleep to the sound. I like to think that it's all stored somewhere in my memory and has been just as fertile as the books I read later.

Another important moment was when I became conscious of language. It happened in school, when I already spoke a couple of foreign languages to some extent. At some point, I realized that many of the wonderful books I was reading were available to me thanks to the fact that someone had translated them into Estonian, word for word, thought for thought, so that in the end you couldn't perceive the original language anymore. The discovery was revelatory, especially when I'd had the opportunity to experience the joys and pains of studying a foreign language for myself. It's possible that's the reason I later became a translator was my delight in playing with words.

**It's always interesting to hear about another author's writing process. From what I gather, you always review your own texts personally, repeatedly, and with a heavy and scrupulous hand. But again, from the beginning: does a story you find stare you straight in the face right away, and is it either poetry or prose? Is it a lucid flash or, rather, murky contours that come into focus over time? Torment, agony, quests, or a fluid and painless rush of ink? Systemic writing, a definite routine, or still moments that alternate with writing gusts? And, lastly, how much do you weed out or rearrange? Are some things occasionally ready even**

**without editing? What's it like with prose? What's it like with poetry? Compare, for example, the stories of how your two novels and your two poetry collections came about...**

Both editing and translating, which is my other job besides writing, teach me to see and avoid overwritten texts. For the most part, I suppose I don't re-write as much as I "peel" a text, trying to free it of everything excessive. It's possible this is also because I began with shorter forms of prose; with novellas.

To me, it's clear more or less immediately whether a long or short work of prose is taking shape. In the beginning, it certainly might be difficult to decide whether one storyline, whether one character's story is a part of that same story, or whether it is something entirely of its own. On occasion, a splinter of a longer story is left over and later becomes a novella. At the same time, it's sometimes hard for me to choose whether an idea should become a poem or a short story. Since I see myself more as a prose writer, I suppose I can honestly admit that some of my poems are more like short stories left unfinished due to a lack of time.

With prose, I structure and polish up to the last second. This is much less the case with poetry: those texts are essentially already rewritten once, because I write them down in a notebook first. Most of my first collection of poems was written during early mornings at my cabin, sitting on literally the very same stump. My second collection emerged on trips, carrying a notebook in my travel bag. My novels have taken shape very differently, too: the first happened rapidly, while the second presented itself to me

very slowly, and I carried it inside of me for quite a long time.

Lately, it's certainly been the case that when it's "writing time", I just sit and write; there's no room for agony if the clock is ticking and non-renewable resource – time – is running out. It's possible that you learn that through living: when you're young, you think there's always more time, but at some point you realize that there might not be. You're able to take a break from one activity by doing another. I've learned that while translating and editing I can effectively rest from writing, and can, for the most part, also learn a thing or two about it; I can even rest from one story by working on another. When writing long works of prose, there are always moments where you hit a rut or feel like the end isn't in sight. At those points, it's worth completing some shorter story in the meantime, where the outcome can be seen immediately. There are also dead points, naturally: over time, you simply learn to outsmart yourself. And all of this, of course, doesn't mean you shouldn't just watch the clouds go by for a while.

**Especially in the case of your latest novel, *Linnade põletamine*, something that probably stands out to readers right away is your pictorial manner of writing. You've said that pictures are the very way in which you think and see the world. What might the benefits of this writing style be? Does it help to hold a longer prosaic text's story together? What, overall, simply makes prose *good* prose, in your opinion?**

The fact that I write in pictures may stem from my training as a playwright, but just as

well might come from the fact that I see and remember the world foremost in pictures; in frozen moments. Memories are like pictures in a photo album: fragments dusted off or held up to the light for a moment, ones which acquire association and meaning only when they are shoved into order.

With both of my novels, by the way, old photographs have been not only important starting points, but also sources: they've helped me to determine tiny details and capture the right atmosphere. Photos can bring unexpected memories to the surface. In purely practical terms, a photo can help date one event or another – documents may be spotty, human memory selective, but a precisely dated photograph doesn't lie so easily. In *Linnade põletamine*, one minor character says something like this: "I've always said you should photograph your things; memory can't be trusted." I think that's true, but since I'm not a photographer, I try to "photograph" with words.

It appears that my next novel will also be a photo album in its own right. At the same time, I think and hope that a writer does change and develop while writing. Some part of your nature certainly remains, but each specific story dictates a part of your style.

In prose, I appreciate linguistic surprises and sensual precision: frequently, the measure for this is whether I feel the urge to read with a pencil, so to speak, to take notes, to learn something, or not. I've striven to translate foreign authors with whom I get that urge: Javier Marías, Enrique Vila-Matas, Roberto Bolaño... Translating is one of the most thorough methods of reading, and allows you to live in a story's world for



KAI AARELEID (SECOND FROM LEFT) AT WRITER'S TOUR  
PHOTO BY ELMO RIIG / SCANPIX

somewhat longer than merely reading it. Fluidly written and masterfully woven stories are sometimes a great pleasure to read, too, but for me very good prose is something that persists in your mind a great deal later. It's usually an emotional charge or an explicitly described atmosphere, some chafing detail or a very well-played-out scene, no matter whether it's funny or tragic, and best if it is both.

**Talk a little about the title *Linnade põletamine*. What, for you, are the book's main themes?**

There are multiple layers within the novel's Estonian-language title. First of all, a connection to playing cards: *linnade põletamine* [literally "burning of cities", Estonian – Trans.] is one of the simplest card games you can play, and is known in English as War, in French as *Bataille*, and in German as *Leben und Tod*. It is almost an endless game guided solely by chance. The human lives in my story are also greatly under the influence of chance.

Lives and bridges are burned to the ground in *Linnade põletamine*, and it all takes

place in Tartu: a town that was nearly razed by fires in World War II, and in the 1950s and 1960s was still pockmarked with ruins and gaping holes. The protagonist Tiina, who over the course of the story grows from a girl into a young woman, is surrounded by empty places both out on the town streets and within the walls of her home.

On the one hand, *Linnade põletamine* is a novel about waning love, the reduction of a marriage to silence, unasked questions, secrets, lies, and addictions; on the other, it is the story of one child's loneliness, which is made that much greater by the fact that on the surface her life isn't lacking anything. Generally, I suppose the book discusses what might be used to fill emptiness in both a literal and a figurative sense. Emptiness can be filled with games: a card game, for instance. In *Linnade põletamine*, playing cards is simultaneously secrecy, entertainment, escape, and a joiner and divider of people.

As a translator, I naturally realize that it's impossible to translate all these layers into another language: inevitably, one shade of meaning or another will have to be abandoned, or the translator will have to think



“outside the box”, which is an interesting challenge for both the translator and the author.

**In the book, Tiina is an exceptionally independent and unbelievably reasonable child. At moments when any of her peers would slam doors, she instead understands and forgives. She’s able to keep secrets. Do you know a girl like that? Is that what you yourself are like? And your own four children: how difficult or easy is it for you to perceive the world of today’s youth, of today’s teenagers?**

Independence and reasonableness are sometimes the only way to survive: having a certain kind of defense mechanism. I do know some unbelievably reasonable children very well, and so Tiina is quite a realistic character, in that sense. There’s not much of me in her. I probably wasn’t that reasonable as a child, nor did I have such a dramatic childhood. If anything, a few of the book’s sub-plots and supporting characters are from my childhood.

As for the world of today’s children – well, the basics haven’t changed; major dramas and major joy still come from the same sources. I do believe that there are more opportunities, which has made some things too easy or taken for granted. On the other hand, there is less false shame, which makes many things easier and more natural.

The Chinese are said to have a curse: may you live in an interesting time. In my opinion, we live in an interesting time; we’ve seen several different power structures and rather giant leaps. Our children are living in an interesting time in a different way, and

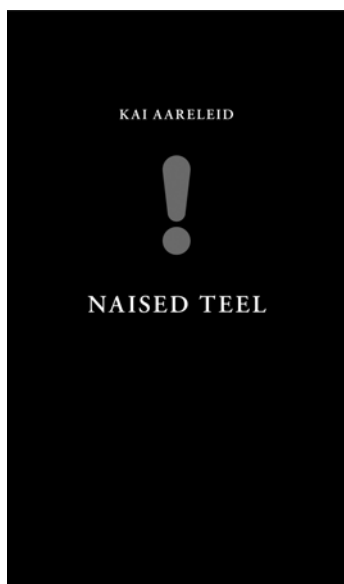
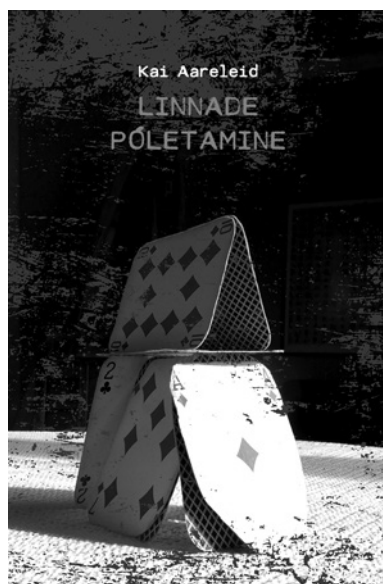
they’re incredibly fascinating to be around. Although I taught my children how to eat with forks and how to read, they teach me something by their example every day, something that’s at least as important.

**What other works that echo post-WWII Estonia do you appreciate, and why? Were they an archetype for or an obstacle to writing *Linnade põletamine*?**

What’s odd is that it is difficult for me to think about “echoing post-WWII Estonia” with my book at all. For me, the story is essentially set in the 1950s and 1960s. I was intrigued by the ghostly proximity and concurrent distance of that “previous time” (and previous lives), since a great rift had occurred (the war), and power and government had changed.

What is important in *Linnade põletamine* is not so much the distresses of a major history, but the twists and turns of a minor history. The novel is primarily about the foolish and unavoidable burning of lives and fates, about the timeless tangled messes of human lives, about the way in which we all fall down, no matter what good intentions we might have, and about how to get back on your feet again: how to survive after losses.

I’ve naturally read the “compulsory” literature (although I didn’t re-read it when writing this book; rather, I tapped into the necessary information and atmosphere from old newspapers, photo albums, and memoirs). At the same time, however, I believe that *Linnade põletamine* is more closely aligned with books that describe Time in general, not a specific era. Hopefully, it can



SELECTION OF KAI AARELEID'S BOOKS

still be seen more as a human drama, and not only as a period drama.

With the post-war years, I was most interested in “miscellaneousness”. Even then, during the poor era of the 1950s in Estonia, recovering from the wounds of war, there were different kinds of lives: some people felt guilty because they hadn’t been deported, or because they lived a relatively wealthy lifestyle in the face of general poverty. Friendships between Estonians and Russians were also uncommon: the friendship between nations was being cultivated superficially, but if an Estonian girl found a friend and companion in a Russian boy, then the situation was considered improper, even though friendship – like love – knows no ethnicity.

One thing I’ve noticed in life is that if bombs aren’t falling and lives aren’t in direct danger, then people simply live their lives: they fall in love, betray, play in both the literal and figurative sense of the word, trip, fall, and waste their lives: they’re human. That is the minor history which intrigues me.

**You and poetry. For those who knew you as a prose writer and a translator, your two collections – published in succession – no doubt came as a surprise. Have you been a secret poet for a long time, or were you yourself surprised by the sudden and irresistible compulsion? And what compulsion was it, in the first place? What kind of an experience is it for you to stand up before an audience as a poet? How do you feel on stage? What do you think is important when interacting with an audience?**

*Naised teel* (Women on Their Way) and *Vihm ja vein* (Rain and Wine) were both compiled with pretty fresh texts. There are waves in a writer’s creative process, just like there are in life. There’s no point fighting the waves: it’s wiser to go with the flow. I suppose that my intense work on the novel and poetry, with its succinct style, were different enough to fit together nicely. So, it simply happened: those ideas and stories found themselves in prose-poetry form.

One of poetry's most enjoyable means of expression is the opportunity to perform it on stage, to turn the writer into a performance artist. I like to perform both my own texts and others dear to me – for the most part, my own texts sound in my head like they could be read out loud, and therefore it's especially interesting to perform "as my own" the kind of text which I would personally never write, but which speaks to me and that I'd like to share with the audience.

Writing is lonely work; audience feedback filters in slowly and in tiny flecks. I don't believe a writer who claims that feedback doesn't matter. Whether or not he or she takes it to heart or is shaken by it is another thing, but feedback really is necessary and beneficial. During a live performance, there is immediate feedback in the form of that energy which forms between the performer and the audience. My education was in theater and I studied to be a dramaturg, but I haven't worked a single day in a theater. Strangely, performing prose and poetry have helped me remember what once drew me to the theater, and to realize that my theater education hasn't rolled off me like water off a duck's back, and that maybe stage-poetry and stage-prose really are my path in the theater world.

### **What do you dream about, on the literary level and otherwise?**

If dreaming means not having two feet on the ground, then I'm incapable of dreaming much on a literary level. Since all areas of my day job are associated with bookmaking, a clear picture of the abundance prevalent in the book world is constantly in front of me. This disciplines and reminds me that there's only a point in adding something to

that abundance if you really have no other choice. I very much like Rilke's advice in *Letters to a Young Poet*: to ask myself in the deepest hour of night whether I must write; only if the response comes confidently and as a yes should I then adapt my life to that inevitability.

There are, however, two or three people in my life with whom I can spin yarns, who are prepared to story-tell irresponsibly with me. That's probably the closest to dreaming: it's incredibly fun, and very few of those storylines end up becoming written stories: they remain dreams.

Otherwise, though, I dream about little things, and also dream about dreaming – about having time and places and peace.

# Two Captains

## Excerpt from *We All Fall Down*

by Kai Aareleid · Translated by Adam Cullen

1960

They meet up at Tiina's house after school. Tiina puts her bag in her room and follows Vova, because he wants to show her his turtle. It's the first time that Vova has invited her over.

Vova shows her his turtle. The turtle's name is Timur.

His family's roomy apartment is above the pharmacy on Heidemann Street. Tiina really likes the thick rugs hanging on the walls of the living room and Vova's parents' bedroom: the rooms are like soft, dark caves. *Vova has a happy life here*, Tiina muses, and feels glad for him. Being so far away from your real home certainly mustn't be easy. They, the Russians, must have a real home somewhere, and you always miss home. Even Tiina misses her home, even though that home is still here—only her family has crumbled.

A white saucepan rests on the gas stove in the kitchen. Vova lifts the lid and inhales.

"Mmm. Yesterday's leftover borscht. Should we eat?"

Tiina nods. She is indeed hungry. It might be the tastiest soup Tiina has ever eaten.

And there's a box-piano in Vova's living room. *An upright*, Vova calls it. *Upright*, Tiina repeats.

It's not merely an instrument, it's a work of art. Tiina trails her fingers across the carved sound box. The wax of past candles has collected in the silver candleholders. Although Tiina has never played a piano before, she resolves at that very moment: someday, she'll buy one like this for herself.

"*C. M. Schröder*," Tiina slowly pronounces the golden lettering above the keyboard. To the right of it is writing in Cyrillic: *А. Е. Яковлев, Санкт-Петербург*.<sup>1</sup>

"It was my grandfather's—my mother's father. The upright and this..."

Vova fingers a metronome set on top of the piano, pushes the weight close to the tip, and releases the pendulum to swing slowly. The metronome ticks, beating calmly and steadily. *Hearts don't beat so calmly*, Tiina thinks.

"Grandpa was a choirmaster at the Mariinsky. You know—at Maria Theater, at Kirov Theater, in Leningrad."

"I've heard of it," Tiina says, although

1 A. E. Yakovlev, *St. Petersburg*

she can't remember what or when. Those whispers, as always.

"Leningrad had a different name then—St. Petersburg, like here on the upright. And it was also Petrograd at some point, in another time, the last..."

"Strange," Tiina murmurs.

"What's that?"

"Oh, nothing... Just it's strange that we Estonians call it the "last time", too. Or the "former time"."

"That means during the last regime. Before the Soviet... Before the revolution, maybe. Before Lenin, right? Leningrad is named after Lenin—Lenin's city. Petrograd was named after Czar Peter. The czar was like a king."

"I know, but I've never really understood it all that well. I mean, that there was one time, sort of, and then another. At home, we still say "back in the Estonian time"."

"Mm-hmm. Mom says that you guys *did* have your own country or your own czar back then. Before you joined the Soviet Union."

Tiina's fingers glide across the piano's lustrous lid. Her hand stops, and she asks softly, without looking directly at Vova:

"At home, does your family talk about the last time at all?"

Vova doesn't answer right away. Tiina peers at him from the corner of her eye and recognizes for a moment the same kind of abrupt guardedness, which she has sometimes noticed her mother and her godmother Ene and many other grown-ups displaying: a split-second frozen expression, a vague glance from side to side, tone slowed down a beat, and a softer voice.

"No," Vova says, looks Tiina in the eye momentarily, looks away again, and adds:

"Mom tells me about it every once in

a while. About her father and sisters and mother—my grandmother. About the war, the blockade."

"The blockade?"

Vova nods.

"Was she in the Leningrad Blockade?"

Vova nods.

"I don't like it when Mom starts talking about it; she gets kind of strange, somehow. All sad, and... I don't want her to be like that."

"I'd like someone to talk about it, rather. They only whisper about it at our home. Like you figure out there's something, but everything's just one big... *тишина*."<sup>2</sup>

Vova looks at Tiina in surprise.

"Where do you know that word from?"

Tina shrugs, rolls her eyes, draws out the word:

"Leeermontov."

They stand there, neither speaking for a while.

"Why'd you turn so sad just now?"

Vova asks.

"I didn't turn sad, I'm just thinking."

Purposefully, Vova stops the metro-nome and says:

"I know! I'll cheer you up in a jiffy. Come on, I'm going to show you something. Come, come!"

Vova leads Tiina to his parents' bedroom.

"Go stand by the window and face the other way."

Tiina hesitates.

"Go on, don't be afraid."

Tiina walks up to the window and stands next to the bed. Positioned on the nightstand are bottles of perfume, a framed photograph. In the photograph are a man

2 *tishina: silence (Russian)*



and a woman, bride and groom. They don't appear to be Vova's parents—the clothes are from an older time. The man has a big, thick beard and is wearing a military uniform jacket: two rows of metal buttons and fringed epaulets.

"Papa and Mamma," Vova says from behind Tiina. "Papa was a captain when he was young. Ta-daa! Look!"

And before Tiina can turn around, Vova breaks out in song.

He has donned a military cap and coat with fringes on the shoulders. He is dancing and flourishing his arms with gusto. Tiina can't stay solemn for long, which only adds to Vova's enthusiasm. He leaps before Tiina, snatches the hat from his head, pops it over his fist, and sings to it in Russian:

Captain, Captain, please do smile,  
After all, your smile's our ship's flag...

Tiina has never seen Vova being so funny before. But he sings well. Vova fits the hat onto Tiina's head and starts marching around the room:

"Well, Tinokha, sing! You know how to!"

And Tiina lets herself be pulled along. Her high soprano starts off cautiously in Russian:

*Kapitan, kapitan...*

But then, a mischievous spark flashes in her eyes, she stops, cocks the cap, and begins again more confidently in Estonian:

Smile, smile, our dear Captain,  
for your smile's the flag upon our mast!  
Smile, smile, please do show your courage,  
for the great wide sea's only for courageous!

Tiina stops dancing in front of Vova, bows gentlemanly, and swings him into dancing with her: they dance from his parents' bedroom into the hallway, along the hallway into the living room, circle around the coffee table (Vova stubs his toe and exclaims: ow!), and from there back into his parents' bedroom through Vova's own. Both are belting out the captain's song in their own respective languages.

They plop down on Vova's parents' bed, giggling and panting. Vova throws himself back and crosses his arms over his stomach. Tiina stares at Vova for a few seconds, and then copies him.

"We're totally crazy—you know that," Tiina says.

"I like being totally crazy sometimes," Vova replies.

"Me, too, I guess."

They are silent. Tiina turns the hat this way and that in her hands.

"This isn't a captain's hat at all, though."

"Nope, it's my father's. But so what. No doubt *I'll* get a captain's hat one day, too!"

"You will?"

"Yep."

"How?"

"I'm going to be a captain *myself*."

"Are you going to be a river captain, then, or what? There's no sea here in Tartu."

"There isn't here, but there is elsewhere," Vova says seriously.

"Elsewhere?"

"You can always dream. Can't you?"

"I guess."

Tiina is briefly silent, then adds:

"I hadn't seen the sea at all until this year. I had no idea what was so special about it."

"But you understood afterward?"

Tiina shrugs.

"The sea is cold. Big. I'm afraid of it, a little."

Vova shakes his head.

"The sea is full of endless possibilities."

Tiina doesn't reply. They lay a couple dozen centimeters away from each other, staring at the chandelier.

"They got that chandelier for their wedding," Vova suddenly says.

"It's pretty."

The chandelier glistens in the afternoon sunlight. Tiina digests the thought: for their wedding. She wonders: what was her own mother and father's wedding like? And how can it be that sometimes, life goes...

Vova reluctantly pushes himself up, tries to look over his shoulder, and asks:

"It's not wrinkled, is it?"

And Tiina replies:

"No, it's not."

"It's made of good English fabric. I guess it *can't* wrinkle," Vova mumbles, hanging the coat up on a hanger.

"What do you mean, 'English'? Are you saying this isn't your father's uniform, then?" Tiina asks, and also stands up to bring Vova the hat. Vova places it on a shelf above the rack.

"No, it is. But Dad says that even though they always say it's Soviet-made, it's really actually fabric from England. Just that you're not allowed to talk about it; that's how things are these days."

"Let's not talk about it, then," Tiina says, because in reality, she couldn't care less.

These days, these times—they go over her head. And "time" is a singular word, just like "sky" and "friendship" and "love". "Life". Yes—"life", too, she supposes.

Vova's parents' wardrobe creaks the exact same way her parents' own does at home.

*How can it be that sometimes, life...* the thought resurfaces in Tiina's mind, but Vova interrupts again. Sometimes, it's good when someone disciplines your stubborn thoughts.

Vova asks:

"Do you remember how the lyrics to that captain's song go on?"

Tiina shakes her head.

"I don't either. Oh, well. Let's go play with Timur."

# Noticing both the major and minor. An interview. Part 2

## Kai Aareleid's questions for Veronika Kivisilla

**For starters, perhaps tell the story of your own writing. The recognition of it, things that guided it...**

Beginnings are always hard to put into words. My desire to write certainly isn't an unwavering knowledge or instinct from childhood. I did start to read at a very young age, I spent a large portion of my time among books as a child (we had lots of them at home!), and my reports were often read aloud at school, but even so there was no "click", no one early "piece". The decision to study Estonian language and literature was probably inspired most by my favorite teacher, by the support and encouragement of my Estonian-language and literature teacher Regina Peet, by her apparently seeing "something" in me, and also by realizing that nothing else interested me more. There was music, of course, but I wasn't talented enough to study it in college. I don't know how many high school students have a very definite vision of their future, but for me the course of things was somewhat accidental. I was also head over heels in love at the time and wasn't even really worried about my entrance exams.

But coincidences are important. I got into the Tallinn Pedagogical University [now Tallinn University – Trans.], and just look at what classmates I had: Jürgen Rooste, Ivar Sild, Jaak Urmet, Kätlin Vainola, and other writers who are now famous! And our faculty was a true powerhouse of Estonian literature and literary studies. Special bonds formed on all fronts, right away. Back then, I hung out mostly with Jürgen and Ivar, who had already been writing before they came to university, but even so I didn't get the feeling of wanting to start writing in their wake. I observed and listened to everything from the sidelines: they read their texts aloud all the time, of course, and their first public performances were already happening, too. The boys in our class took inspiration from the lectures and works of the Estonian poet Toomas Liiv, and that influence was mutual: after a long break, Toomas started writing again. That was beautiful. I myself was leaning more towards linguistics at the time, and to this day I feel a little guilty for maybe disappointing a few instructors. In hindsight, I realize, of course, that I'm not the academic type at all. I had to first dive into

life headfirst, have two children, work as an Estonian-language teacher at a school, try my hand at writing literature textbooks, editing, translation, and book reviews, and then at a certain point in my life find myself in a phase where everything just seemed to be spinning topsy-turvy, and then, in a deep spiritual crisis, suddenly start... to write poetry... It was a stormy time, in every sense. My first book was finished and published before I could really grasp how it had all happened. It took a good long while to be able to tell myself that I was a poet. Even now, something within me occasionally resists letting me call myself a poet. But still, I understand that being a poet is a way of perceiving living and the world. In that sense, I suppose I've been a poet my whole life, even if I "officially" started late. If you interpret it that way, then there are many more poets around us than we realize. Some, who are poets through and through in spirit never publish a single line.

### **How do you write?**

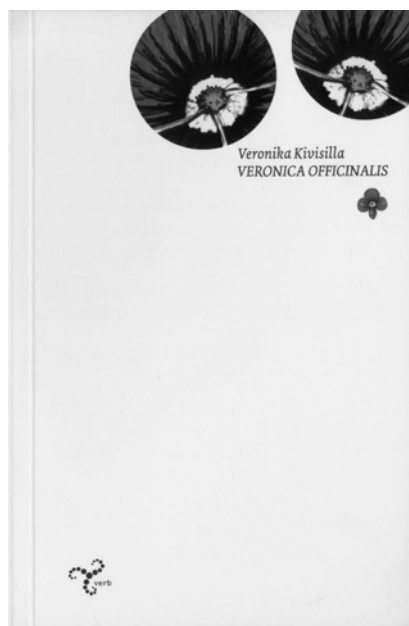
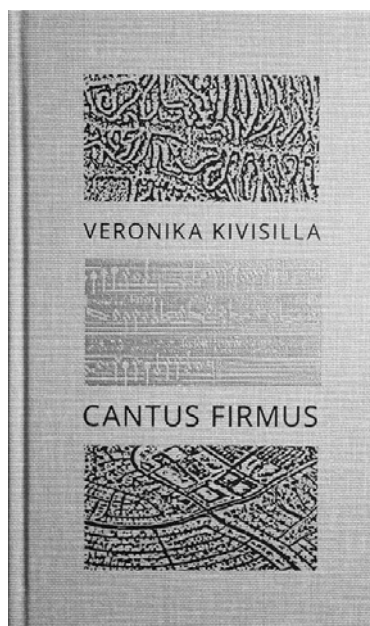
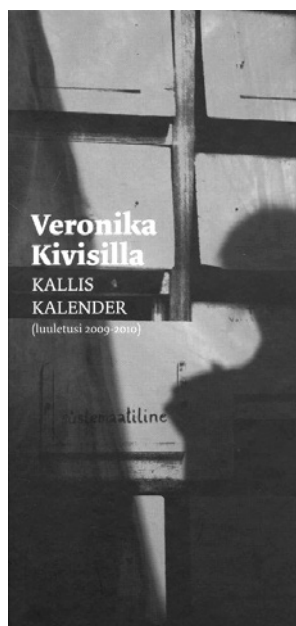
I only write poems when I feel like it, when there is pain or special conditions or some picture or a story or an image which condenses into a poem in my head. I've also written some texts on commission, although I don't see that as the "right" thing to do. Maybe that comes from my ineptitude. I always carry a notebook in my bag: it's a part of my standard gear when I leave home. When I forget it, which is rare, I immediately feel irritated. Even if it's during a period when I'm not writing at all, the notebook gives me some sense of security. Walking puts my thoughts in motion. Quite a few long-sought wordings settle into place. It's crucial that I write them down immediately, and as a result,

my notebook pages are quite chaotic: I've written in jolting buses and in sleet storms. Sometimes, it takes a good deal of effort to later decipher a word recorded in blotted ink or scrawled handwriting.

In terms of daily rhythm, early morning is the best. It's an energetic time when I'm most awake and effective. If a deadline is breathing down my neck, I never torture myself late at night, but rather leave the writing for the morning. I'm a big procrastinator and last-minute type, in general. It wears me out from time to time. I know that a deadline is coming closer and closer, but I'm incapable of sitting down and getting to it. I let time slip away to the final moment: I can't even sleep then, because anxiety and worry keep me up.... I fret and I



VERONIKA KIVISILLA · PHOTO BY EERO VABAMÄGI / SCANPIX



wriggle. And then, I whip everything up in a single go. That whole time my brain has merely been “simmering”. Occasionally, I’m jealous of those who are capable of maintaining a stable writing rhythm, i.e. every day from this time to that time, etc. I’m unstable, a sort of “erupter”. I erupt and then afterward I might be silent and empty for a while, just to collect and erupt once again.

In regard to writing, however, I have to mention the moments in which a text’s progression completely intoxicates me, when it brings me into an incredible, uplifting trance. Or, in some cases, an astounding sense of liberation, of relief. I’ve experienced writing’s therapeutic effect on several occasions.

**Since you’ve also written prose and marginalia, how do you determine a text’s genre? Is it clear at the start?**

Classifying isn’t my strongest suit. In the case of my first collection (*Kallis kalender*,

Dear Calendar, 2011), my poems’ rap-like quality was mentioned. This came as a surprise to me, because I don’t have any close ties to rap. I suspect that I’ve acquired formal influences from oral folklore, and my background in philology probably plays a part, occasionally making me perform and relish linguistic somersaults. However, I feel closest to the world of storytelling. A longtime friend is the storyteller Piret Päär. I’ve become much richer by being around her: I know that a well-told story is the best art and gift. I appreciate the skill.

I’ve written very little prose. I hope that perhaps its path and my testing of it still lie ahead. In terms of the genre, I treasure prose poetry and short stories, which I suppose require and offer a condensed form that is similar to poetry in terms of language and content.

Generally, I don’t really ponder what one piece of writing or another should become. They take shape somehow on their own.



**You mentioned storytelling. You have performed a lot as a storyteller and a singer. How is your work complemented by performance, reading your own and others' texts, storytelling, and singing?**

I love stories; I thirst for them. A story can be presented in several different ways, of course. Genuine storytelling is the absolute best, but reading aloud is important in my opinion, too. At home, I often read aloud to my kids, even though both have known how to read for a long time. It's a mutual pleasure. When I taught at a school, I realized that oftentimes there was no other way to calm down, engross, or talk today's restless and jittery youth into something than to tell or read them a story. That goes for my own creative activity, too. I suppose that nowadays it's necessary for an author's voice to literally be heard. When reading my poems at Estonian libraries, I'm glad to hear that a lively performance has hit its mark and has even spoken to the older generation, which grew up with an entirely different kind of poetry. To this day, it's been truly hard to get them hooked on newer poetry: those who usually consider it worthless. Direct contact with an audience and their reaction when my performance touches them are beyond compare. When performing, I find that creativity and flexibility are important. A text must be perceived as a whole, and can only be claimed when it touches your soul! I don't appreciate practiced, flawless, but lifeless performances. If there isn't a pre-agreed program and composition, then I rarely go to perform with full knowledge of what I'm going to read exactly. I'm happy if I have the courage to just "play it as it comes along", that the specific place and audience

result in my selection of texts and the entire program. I like to read other poets' texts along with my own. It's a change of pace when you're sick of your own texts, and it's an opportunity to acknowledge an author whose works are important to you, and to introduce them to your audience as well.

Music and song... I don't see myself as a musician at all, but music is a major and important part of me. I've done choral singing for 12 years, and lately have become involved in folk and early music. I cherish those forms the most. There's not a day that goes by at home without instrument-playing, singing, improvisation, or listening to music. I feel especially free when I sing. At times, it's even simpler and more natural than reading. At the same time, I don't believe that every writer should necessarily take the stage to sing, dance, bang a drum, or do somersaults. Only if it's a natural part of his or her nature. And there are more than enough multi-talented writers to go around! Sometimes, I think we really should put together some kind of a band or a choir, just like actors who sing. But it appears that a writers' football team will be getting together first of all...

**How does a poetry collection take shape?**

For me, a poetry collection isn't simply a particular number of pages or texts piled on top of one another. The emergence of my latest collection *Cantus firmus* was the calmest, ripest, and most thought-out for me. Three years had passed since my second book (*Veronica officinalis*, 2012), a decent break for collecting and letting



things settle. The majority of the texts in *Cantus firmus* existed before the book formed as a consistent whole in my mind's eye. It took a couple weeks of summer silence and solitude to achieve the right feeling, polish a few unfinished ideas into poems, and put together the manuscript. And then, all of a sudden, the picture came into focus, so before it went to print six months later, I changed almost nothing. I was in luck with the design once again (I think Piia Ruber's designs of the two previous collections were also great successes). Asko Künnap marched off with an army of bark-beetles to ornament *Cantus firmus*. Quite honestly, I think back to the story of *Cantus firmus*' development with a sense of peace and pleasure. A few moments are especially bright in my mind: such as how when Asko and I sat down to discuss the design for the first time (his second child had just been born and was sleeping in her stroller like a tiny curled-up caterpillar), we both exclaimed in unison: "Bark beetles!" And so, the bronze-colored interleaves were filled with bark-beetle labyrinths, old city blueprints, and medieval sheet music – all of which mark out paths, progressions, patterns, and arrival.

It was a jubilant feeling going to pick up the first copies from the print house! My very own book, aromatic and straw-gold! Cloth-bound! I regard the book's release as a part of the history of its creation: the first fresh, warm spring rain and a spectacularly beautiful evening in a Ukrainian church nestled behind secret walls on Laboratoorium Street in Tallinn's Old Town. Crimean wines, homemade bread, friends, a bonfire, and great company until the early hours of the morning. I felt somehow brave sending a work born with such emotion out into the world!

**Tell me about the "footnotes" in *Cantus firmus*. It's a marvelous idea: telling about the ideas behind how those little stories came about.**

When I was typing my poems from my notebook into the computer, I wondered what to do with the notes that I'd written next to almost every text at various times. I couldn't bear to abandon them right away, and just for fun I initially typed them in next to the poems. And that's where they stayed. More and more, it felt like they belonged with the texts. There were doubts, of course, about whether they might smother the poems, but I was also encouragingly advised by my friends who have editor's eyes to leave the notes in the manuscript. Now, readers can decide for themselves whether to take the notes as independent little stories or extensions of the poems. Or to simply forego reading them.

**For me, *Cantus firmus* (which is actually true of your texts in general) is, foremost, one big book of consolations or a book of escape routes: what consoles and redeems a person in the**

**difficulty of existence... Minor things, actually – or major, rather, because they are eternal and... ancient? What do you say to that? How would you summarize it? What kind of feedback have you received from readers? Have you found out anything about yourself and your works that you didn't know before? Do you receive fan mail!?**

I'd like to dodge that question somehow and just say "Thanks!", as in my awkwardness and shyness, it's the only thing I've been able to say to quite a few people who have shared their experiences of reading *Cantus firmus* and have said good words about it. What can I say? I believe that no matter how big and important the things are that people do, we are all fundamentally similar: we all undergo very difficult periods in life from time to time, and we all seek consolation and redemption, peace and clarity. If only we were capable of noticing and understanding that an escape route is so close: it's just that it is so normal and inconspicuous that we don't recognize it or don't know how to see it as something special. It's always possible to take a situation in one way, or in a completely different way, in exhaustion or exasperation: "AGAIN, I have to cook...". OR, RATHER, being thankful to see your child shoveling down soup, hungry after football practice. Should you swear at the dust or think: as long as there's dust, there's life, there's love, there's EVERYTHING.

A couple of readers have singled out the love poem in *Cantus firmus*. That surprised me, but also pleased me, because that was the one that gave me the most doubts. I was afraid it would be seen as sappy or something. However, I've heard that it's not. What makes me happiest is the knowledge that

something which has been very personal for me as a writer has also touched such a wide range of people. Consequently, I've managed to make a tiny story or part of my inner world somehow broader. Recognition is probably what I hope to find as a reader, too.

**What do you regret?**

I try to live without regrets. I've done stupid things, and awful things have happened. I've wasted time. I've crossed lines that perhaps I shouldn't have crossed, while others have remained untouched because of ambition or cowardice. Quite a few emotional and work things have "flopped". Yes, they certainly have. But how does it benefit me to get stuck on something gone wrong? One Estonian folk song goes: you'll ruin your neck with regret, ruin your mind with worry.... I'd like to believe that everything that's happened has been a part of my path and growth. Things can always get better. You can always think that perhaps that "flop" was really the best thing that could have happened. If not at the moment, then maybe sometime later, you understand the benefit of something.

Sometimes, in the evenings, when my loved ones are home safe and sound and there's time to think back on the day and what's happened, I list off to myself all the things that should give me cause to be thankful. And they're not in short supply!

I'm unable to regret anything in terms of my writing, either – not a single line! Maybe I would have regretted something if I'd started writing at a very young age, but probably not. It would have been exciting, no doubt, just as it will hopefully be exciting to read this same interview after a few dozen years!

# Poetry by Veronika Kivisilla

*Translated by Adam Cullen*

## Too nice a drunk

locking up my bike in front of the store  
a babbling drunk approached me  
I wanted to withdraw  
but he said  
listen  
you forgot  
to pat your steed after the ride  
I was startled but obeyed  
pat-pat-pat  
went my hand on the seat

approval flashed in the drunk's eyes:  
listen  
you're young and pretty  
but don't you go  
sitting on the ground  
before spring thunder

I had a sweetheart once  
Signe  
young and pretty too  
but y'see she didn't listen  
and was ugly and ill afore long

I looked upon the drunk  
grey-stubbed face  
missing most of his teeth  
(though his words weren't toothless at all)  
but his eyes  
were long-lashed  
handsome blue kind

that drunk had been a little boy once  
for whom purses were searched for candy  
people said  
what a boy  
what eyelashes  
like a doll's  
his mother's pride and joy

too kind unfortunately  
I thought as I patted my bike  
before the ride  
and spurred it on our way  
mounting the saddle once more  
and speeding off

but the drunk sat down  
on the ground in front of the store  
long before  
the first spring thunder

## **But someday a slow time will start**

perhaps on a  
Friday night following frenetics and frenzy  
when I find in my mailbox a ticket  
for constant speeding  
and you know what:  
you've got a several-year debt of silence  
we'd ask you to pay  
at first opportunity  
otherwise we may stop or constrain  
or even permanently shut down

then the morning must dawn at last  
when I wake up only by daylight  
gather the alarm clock's fallen hands  
and sticks from my head  
with those I'll light the wood-burning stove

all is only budding  
I greet titmice tick- to tockteen minutes  
then put stews on the stove  
oxtail soup set to quiver  
until the broth turns gluish from fat  
leg of lamb in the oven for eternity  
beans are already soaking

the slowest  
dishes  
of all

there's time for grinding spices  
for waiting while  
caraway and cardamom  
surrender their deepest secrets

boiling and baking  
become a whole day's doing  
I no longer put up with  
wiping out my initial appetite  
by gobbling  
I want to feel every mouthful  
reaching atoms  
nourishing and replenishing them  
there's time for chatting with plasma

time for healing old pains  
not merely for swiftly silencing them

when I've finally smeared scented lanolin  
down to the tip of my toes  
so that from then on all excess  
can simply slide away

I can, I start a treatise  
in praise of slowness:

bodily speed depends on the frame of reference  
by which speed is measured

*> Speed-proof, water- and whistle-resistant,  
breathable gore-tex me*



\*

To be awake and still  
so early  
when day has appeared for us again  
a day like driftwood  
on the shore of all days  
new and old alike

to be stiller than still  
and grasp what is tinier than tiny –  
that when silence has become and stayed our jewel

you might even hear how  
garden snail penetrates dandelion leaves

to be so still  
you might notice anemone's grace  
blossom from last year's waste  
might divine –  
no doubt abundance will one day tower  
above each ache

to be truly still  
so anticipation holier than holy  
might elevate us

so the light of old worlds  
might shine  
and the hope of the new be  
perceived

(diminuendo)

so we might finally realize  
there is no final silence:  
only a suspending pause

and then a beginning again

(piano pianissimo)

to be so awake and still  
to believe  
every wingbeat affects  
and beetle-prayer

(sotto voce)

to be still even yet  
when the day has just gone  
but to plead before sleep:  
save us  
save us from empty clamor

Night sparks candles on the chestnut tree  
air sings in imaginary tongue

a gust through the open window is knowledge  
that both our irises  
blossomed in synchrony  
on this night

I suppose I think about you  
in imaginary tongue  
for everything thickens around me  
forming a single word  
that I don't yet know  
nor dare say aloud



# Memories and history – friends or enemies?

by Peeter Helme

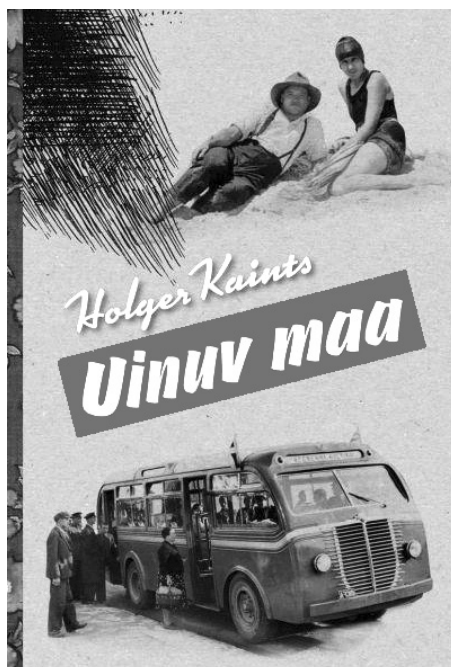
Kai Aareleid, Holger Kaints and Ilmar Taska deal with the 1940s in their newest novels.

Discussing the relationship between memories and history somewhat resembles the debate over which came first, the chicken or the egg. Although there is no point in trying to reach a final conclusion, nor is it worthwhile taking the debate too seriously, it is nevertheless clear that history and memories depend on each other. You could probably say that, on the one hand, history is reflected in memories and, on the other, memories help to construct history. Memory without history is simply storytelling, but history without memories is dry, factual crumbs.

Thus, it is not strange that historians of all eras have striven to embellish their works with true-to-life details, while fiction writers conversely tend to rely on the work of historians in order to weave together with facts that which makes history the story of us all: life itself.

It is astonishing that in the spring of 2016 three novels were published in Estonia that all speak of the grimmest times in

20th-century Estonian history: the annexation of the Estonian state, World War II, and the Stalinist era. Holger Kaints (1957) begins at the earliest point; his *Uinuv maa* (Drowsy Land) starts in 1938. The





HOLGER KAINTS · PHOTO BY VALLO KRUUSER / SCANPIX

starting point for the central narrative of Kai Aareleid's (1972) *Linnade põletamine* (We All Fall Down) is the pivotal 1941, although there are flashbacks to the era of Estonia's first independence. Ilmar Taska's (1953) *Pobeda 1946* (A Car Called Victory) commences in the year included in the Estonian-language title, which is also the year that Kaints' work ends. Aareleid's chronological reach is broader: the novel begins and ends in 2013, but the main plot extends from the early 1940s to the early 1960s.

Thus, the three authors all handle basically the same years, each focusing on different perspectives in their equally tragic stories.

\*

The title of Holger Kaints' novel is programmatic. In one respect, "Drowsy Land" alludes to the perception of one of the book's central characters: a young communist recently released from prison, who sees Estonia as a lethargic little pond

ignorant of its own fate. However, Kaints' book has a more serious historical-political dimension: it establishes a direct connection between the autocratic rule of Estonian President Konstantin Päts – termed the Era of Silence – and the two occupations that followed. Kaints' message is merciless: the former caused the latter, and society's submissive and compliant transition from independence to occupation became possible in thanks to political "drowsiness".

Kaints' perspective is relatively unexpected: the protagonist is a young woman unconcerned with the events that are transpiring. She marries a staunch communist, giving the author an opportunity to address the fateful last years of Estonian independence from the standpoint of communists enraged by authoritarianism.

At the center of Ilmar Taska's *Pobeda 1946*, conversely, is a relatively naive but sharp-minded boy who registers everything

happening around him in detail, but is unable to competently differentiate between good and bad. As a result, the work's main characters – an NKVD<sup>1</sup> agent, the boy's mother, who has nationalist sympathies, and his mother's former prima donna half-sister, who despises the regime – as well as secondary characters, including orphanage wards and workers, feature more as embodiments of different principles than they do as individuals.

The protagonist in Kai Aareleid's *Linnade põletamine* is likewise a child: a girl named Tiina, who grows to adulthood over the course of the novel. Since the unfolding and development of her personality is framed by a time predisposed to silence, Tiina's primary traits are her attentiveness to minor details, good memory, and skill at perceiving the causes behind events, even though

she lacks the knowledge and experience needed to rationally interpret them.

Although the three works share great contextual similarities, Taska's and Aareleid's novels intersect more with each other, while Kaints' stands at a slight distance in many senses. Particularly striking in both *Pobeda 1946* and *Linnade põletamine* is the child's perspective, which not only connects these two books, but also brings to mind a legendary work of Estonian literature: Viivi Luik's (1946) *Seitsmes rahukevad* (The Seventh Spring of Peace, 1985). It likewise contains a view of the world through the eyes of a child and, as one might suspect from the title, its plot runs until the early 1950s.

One question forcefully arises: why have Estonian writers returned to that period now, during the latter half of the second decade of the 21st century? And why from a child's perspective? Did Luik leave anything out? Had the Soviet era pressed its stamp on *Seitsmes rahukevad*, forbidding the author to speak candidly?

<sup>1</sup> *The People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs (NKVD) was the name of the Soviet state security agency in 1941 and from 1943–1946.*





Perhaps, surprisingly, an answer to these questions can be found in the one novel of the three that features not a child, but an adult woman at the center of the plot: Holger Kaints' *Uinuv maa*.

\*

When speaking about writing *Pobeda 1946*, Ilmar Taska (whose background is in film-making) has admitted that he basically proceeded from the rules of cinema, which demand a coherent plot and characters with whom anyone can identify (one of the novel's main characters is a British BBC journalist, so that Western readers can find something and someone familiar in the story, set behind the Iron Curtain). Similarly, much of Taska's and his family's own personal history can be found in the book: the author was born to deportee parents in 1953 in Kirov, Siberia.

Kai Aareleid has likewise said that much of *Linnade põletamine* is her own family history and, although the work contains mainly micro-historical material and post-war Tartu folklore, the focus is not on history in the wider sense, but on one family, seen through the eyes first of a child, then a teenage girl, and ultimately a young woman.

In the epilogue of Holger Kaints' *Uinuv maa*, the author mentions stories heard in his childhood, and so the book is also connected to a particular family history. But at the same time, the author cites historians and reference works, of which Jaak Valge's extensive study *Punased I* (The Reds I, which addresses the Estonian Marxist movement and its leading figures) especially stands out. Reading this and other historical volumes gave Kaints an opportunity to delve into the projects and activities of Estonia's former communist elite, as well as to describe with psychological conviction and empathy the characters who had their first success in 1940, and beginning in the autumn of 1944 applied themselves with merciless determination to building communism in Estonia. "Bourgeoisie manure will be the fertilizer of our bright future," one says with satisfaction, a phrase with which Kaints certainly captures his characters' mentality.

Although Kai Aareleid's book – whose misery-rich post-war Tartu is shown with extreme realism – is not short on abstractions, a convincing milieu, or compelling, true-to-the-era characters (nor is Ilmar Taska's, who manages to convey the paranoid atmosphere of 1946 with terrifying clarity), diverging goals are nevertheless apparent between the two and Kaints.





KAI AARELEID · PHOTO BY URMAS LUIK / SCANPIX

Specifically, Aareleid and Taska focus more on plot: for the former, the content is of equal importance to the way in which it is presented; for the latter, scenes with tremendous impact, memorable backdrops, and a rapidly branching storyline are what are important. It probably would be an exaggeration to say that Kaints is intrigued by the historical-political dimension, but his book can truly be read as a polemical commentary on the works of Estonian historians, and on a particular debate that has been going on in Estonian society since the late 1980s, fading from time to time, only to surface again with greater intensity. It is a debate that can be condensed into a single agonizing question: was the silent surrender of 1939 right and inevitable, or could an alternative have been found?

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This same agonizing question also offers an indirect answer to why any Estonian author

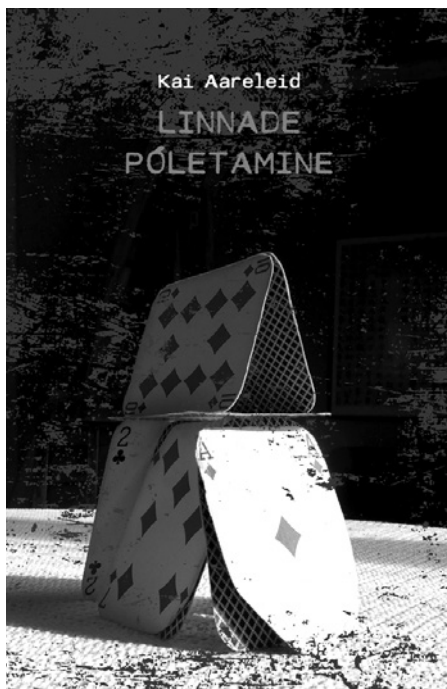
would, in the early 21st century, turn back to Stalin, Hitler, deportations, and genocide in the first place. It is obvious that we will never know whether Taska, Aareleid, and Kaints would have been able to write these books in 1985. At the same time, it is also clear that every generation not only wishes to tell its own story in its own particular way, but in a broader sense every era needs that. And this is true not only in regard to the problems that directly impact the given era, but more generally.

Perhaps now, when those who were children during World War II and the Stalinist terrors are becoming ever more important as we think back on the events, it is the right time to allow children's voices to speak. And authors for whom this isn't enough, who wish to do something more (such as focus on the psyches of communist collaborators, as in Kaints' case), must seek out other sources than those that are written or passed down orally in families. And this is

precisely where the complicated interplay between history and memories comes in: a game in which it is impossible and, in truth, pointless to choose sides. Memory, with its passionate closeness, trumps the chilliness of a scholarly historical treatment, but we are nevertheless only able to conjecture about the greatest abstractions thanks to the factual work of historians.

Considering the very unique position of a child as witness to an era (children may register uncomfortable minute details of the adult world, and comprehend them only decades later, in adulthood), the Chairman of the Estonian Writers' Union Tiit Aleksejev raised an excellent question during a radio program: if the depiction of war and post-war life through the eyes of a child has now been dissected in the settings of Tallinn (Taska), Tartu (Aareleid),

and the countryside (Luik), then can we expect the 1960s, for instance, to be handled next? Perhaps. The Estonian classic Mati Unt's 1963 novel *Hüvasti, kollane kass* (Goodbye, Yellow Cat) accompanied several generations of young Estonians through their teenage years, but it would be exciting if someone tackled that decade in all its upheaval, contradiction, and of course romanticism anew. There's enough material to go around. And just as Kai Aareleid and Ilmar Taska have proven as memory writers and Holger Kaints as a history writer, Estonia certainly boasts authors capable of crossing the divide between decades, each reviving with their own unique styles and methods a time which hasn't actually disappeared but is merely forgotten, in both its pain and its beauty.



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**PEETER HELME** (1978) is an Estonian writer and journalist, and anchors the Estonian Public Broadcasting's literary radio programs. Helme has published five novels. The latest of these, *Sügaval läänes* (Deep in the West, 2015), is a crime story set in the industrial Ruhr Valley.

# Our Leelo

by Mare Müürsepp

I'll start with children's assessment. We had a group of third-grade students draft a list of who they believed were important public figures in Estonia. We used the list to make a presentation for our foreign pen-pals entitled "Famous Estonians". Tied for first place in the children's ranking were Estonian President Toomas Hendrik Ilves, a teenage world-champion freestyle skier, and Leelo Tungal. Clearly, Tungal is not an "ordinary" children's author, but a symbolic figure.

Tungal's writings deal with children and their families and span the media of common reading materials, schoolbooks (her ABC-primer characters Adam and Anna have endured for decades), song repertoires, journalism, and public performances. Although the author has written many librettos and drama pieces, she has definitely enjoyed her greatest public fame at the Estonian Song Festivals, at which song authors are called to take the stage before hundreds of thousands of cheering and clapping audience members expressing delight with an intensity uncommon for Estonians. Tungal's lyrics have been used in pieces for both children's and adult choirs. Thus, she belongs to all Estonians, and her works can be found in most of our homes.

She can frequently be seen speaking on behalf of children and as a patron of children's protection and family events.

However, Leelo Tungal's name is probably associated most with children's literature. Her latest thick collection of children's poems is entitled *Südasuvi* (Midsummer), and in it the author's pen has truly glided luxuriantly and liberally in a summery way. Naturally, she also includes poems about winter and other seasons: as a magazine editor (Tungal has worked at children's magazines since 1973 and has edited her own publication, *Hea Laps*, since 1994), she knows very well that an author should write children poems about every time and topic.

Tungal's children's poetry is exuberant: she often finds multiple good ways to develop the same motif, and each is led to a resolution that is precise. Her thirst for rhythm and vigor in producing sound elements are irresistible. It is as if poetry is a physiological state for Tungal: her primary form of speaking.

Leelo Tungal has discussed about how she got her name: in June 1947, the year she was born, the XII Estonian Song Festival was held in Tallinn, and one of the more popular



LEELO TUNGAL · PHOTO BY EERO VABAMÄGI / SCANPIX





LEELO TUNGAL SIGNING BOOKS · PHOTO BY ELMO RIIG / SCANPIX

choral songs performed was “Leelo”. The word signifies Estonian folk singing in general, and Leelo Tungal can certainly be regarded as a folk bard. Still, whatever is topical in Estonian society at the moment can always be found echoing in her poems.

Tungal’s children’s poetry is upbeat: you could even say that it’s hard to find any of her children’s texts that don’t contain something funny. This aspect fascinates children. Jokes are infectious and boost courage. Jokes often arise from unexpected associations, and it’s great to re-read a story to experience a joke anew. Tungal’s stories, which are built on alliteration and shifted meaning, are not always easy to understand, but once you pick up on the joke, you want to re-read the text again and again. At the same time, the poet perennially has a smile and a candidly compassionate word

for those who have had a rough time in life: a child who is better understood by his or her dog than by other people, a child who has no father to take to the school’s Father’s Day celebration, etc. Tungal’s stories often include unexpected twists. A mother and father take a break from their children and set off on a trip, but while they’re away they sadly hug the kids’ teddy bears. The narrator encourages a teacher to hit him (“Hit me, dear teacher / with your soft hand...”), but in the last stanza, it turns out that the narrator is a ball, with which the teacher hasn’t had time to play in a long while.

In Tungal’s children’s stories, she calls on the reader to notice and resolve problems: she is riveted by the theme of children whose lives lack something important, such as parental care or friendship. Nevertheless, her storytelling always carries a cheerful tone.

Just like many other very talented children's writers, Leelo Tungal shouts out: "don't just lock me away in the children's room!" Luckily, her poetry collections for adults have also received favorable reviews. She has been praised for her formulaic precision and sincerity, and she is fearlessly open: her entire life, as well as contemporary cultural history and social life, have been recorded with a genuineness that is occasionally painful.

Some of Tungal's poems have undergone odd developments since they were first penned. When she was just a schoolgirl, Tungal wrote *Oma laulu ei leia ma üles* (I Cannot Find My Song), a poem that carries the dreams and yearnings of a young woman. A few years later, it was used as the lyrics for an exceptionally beautiful song written by the renowned composer Valter Ojakäär and performed gently, hauntingly by Heli Lääts – one of the most popular stage figures at that time. Over the last decade, however, the song is better known from the cover performed by the folk-metal band Metsatöll, in which it has a wild and aggressive character. In 2008, the Metsatöll version of *Oma laulu ei leia ma üles* became the theme song of the TV series *Tuulepealne maa* (Windswept Land), which deals with the Estonian nation's hardship-filled history. A young woman's secret thoughts were transformed into a piece in which the difficulty of finding her "own song" signifies the problems of national self-awareness, and the worry about the fragility of identity. Just as the TV show's title conveys Estonians' place in a windswept land, so can every twist in history force many of us to "sing another's song": to go along with a new regime. But perhaps that meaning similarly shows that

in the somewhat downcast reflections of her younger days, Leelo Tungal struck an emotional chord in all Estonians.

Overall, a very clear boundary exists between Tungal's poetry for children and for adults: the door to the children's room is safely closed when the adults walk alone.

Even so, there is occasionally a sense of border violation. As a singer in a mixed choir, I've rehearsed for many Song Festivals Urmas Lattikas' song *Väike maa* (Little Land), the lyrics of which are a slightly truncated version of Leelo Tungal's poem *See väike maa* (This Little Land). The poem was published in a collection of children's poetry, defining its genre. Among the other lines carrying the spirit of the Estonian homeland is: "where the winter sun sets anew as it rises, where the school path is lined with dark ice like glass". During choir practices, we naturally sing phrases over and over, dozens of times, and I always strive to imagine (working in education, I admittedly have a lovely image of school paths frozen in my memory) what my fellow singers – those stern and businesslike representatives of respectable professions – are thinking and feeling about those words. The song rings out, reverent and sacred. Tungal has managed to convey a specific, very ordinary image from childhood memories which brings a wide array of people together.

Tungal's most important work of prose – a trilogy, the first two parts of which have been released so far: *Seltsimees laps* (Comrade Child) and *Samet ja saepuru* (Velvet and Sawdust) – is rooted in the attempt to bring childhood memories to life with exceptional vividness. Hopefully, the third part will soon be finished. At the



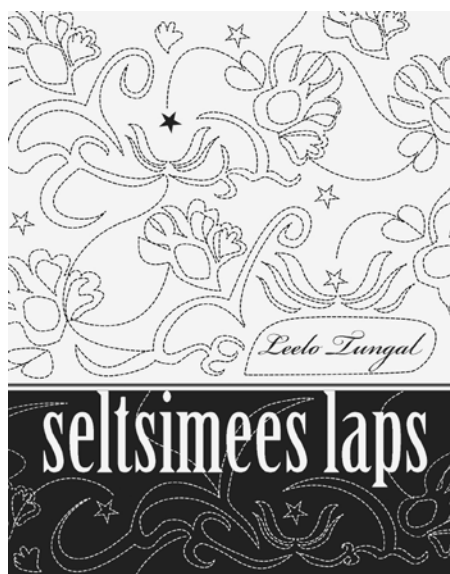
core of the autobiographical series' plot is the arrest of Leelo's mother, a school director, in 1951, as part of Stalin's ideological cleansing. The author tells the entire story from her own point of view: at the beginning of the trilogy, she is a young girl just turning four years old. When discussing the book, Tungal has emphasized the fact that 150 teachers were arrested at that time. (A larger wave of deportations had taken place in 1949, when more than 20,000 people were taken from Estonia.) Since quite a number of memoirs have been published by famous Estonian cultural and public figures (as well as by lesser-known authors), one might ask what makes Tungal's story special.

On the literary level, Tungal is exceptional for her acute attention to detail and very graceful understanding of the possibilities offered by writing for children.

As the author herself has explained, she has attempted to write the story several times over the course of her life, and now, in her later years and possessing a wealth of life-experience, she has decided in favor of conveying memories from the mouth of a child. Some readers have expressed doubt about whether such a young child would be capable of remembering everything that happened to and around her in such great detail. However, one must take into account the fact that Tungal was an only child and spent a great deal of time in the company of adults, who frequently forgot that she was listening and consequently allowed a thing or two not meant for children's ears to slip. One noteworthy individual was Leelo's father, who was also a teacher and an active cultural organizer in the community. In spite of the tragic situation, he managed to think of his

child's needs: building an environment for her that was as safe as possible, encouraging her to see joy and continuance in life, and – just like the other family members – helping the future writer to mentally record and give consideration to that sad period.

For the most part, children's memories consist of what they are told. However, many people who write for a young audience can confirm that if someone consciously delves into his or her childhood memories, then new doors will start to open, as in a gallery, causing the adult to recall specific situations, images, light, smells, sounds, surfaces, and objects his or her hands once touched. A skilled receiver can filter a rich picture of an era out of the sharp scent of a black leather jacket and the manner of speech in a foreign language, being up on the shoulders of one's father or him riding a motorcycle, stirring Soviet songs playing from a radio, or stitching together a doll's fabric body. Additionally, the child's inadequate ability to interpret situations strikingly highlights





the tragedy of the story: her mother is sentenced to 25 + 5 years in a prison-camp and settlement, and when the child returns from staying with relatives for a couple of weeks, she asks whether 25 + 5 years are over yet. The fear and anticipation she suffers while waiting for the return of her mother pervade *Seltsimees laps*, as she constantly imagines her mother's homecoming. One especially painful scene unfolds at the circus: a place which should be entertaining, but which only ends up magnifying her uncertainty with its strange and unaccustomed sights.

The filigreed tracing of a child's thought process imbues Tungal's novel with universal human power: it is a story about fear and the preservation of hope. At the same time, the autobiographical work broadens opportunities for understanding the rest of the author's bibliography: does the cheerfulness of her children's poetry actually convey her father's instructions on how to get by in life, to be happy and kind?

The designs of two of Tungal's children's poetry books feature poppies, and one of them, which was dedicated to her mother, is entitled *Mooni avastamine* (Discovering a Poppy). Poppies grow in abundance near Tungal's home, and the author's identification with the surrounding environment is clearly perceptible in her poetry. However, poppies also have a special significance in relation to war and peace: they prefer calcium-rich ground, which frequently develops as a consequence of intense warfare. Thus, the flower is also a symbol of peace and endurance. Leelo Tungal's works, and her personality, give us hope for that.

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# The Last Laureate?

## An interview with Jaan Kaplinski

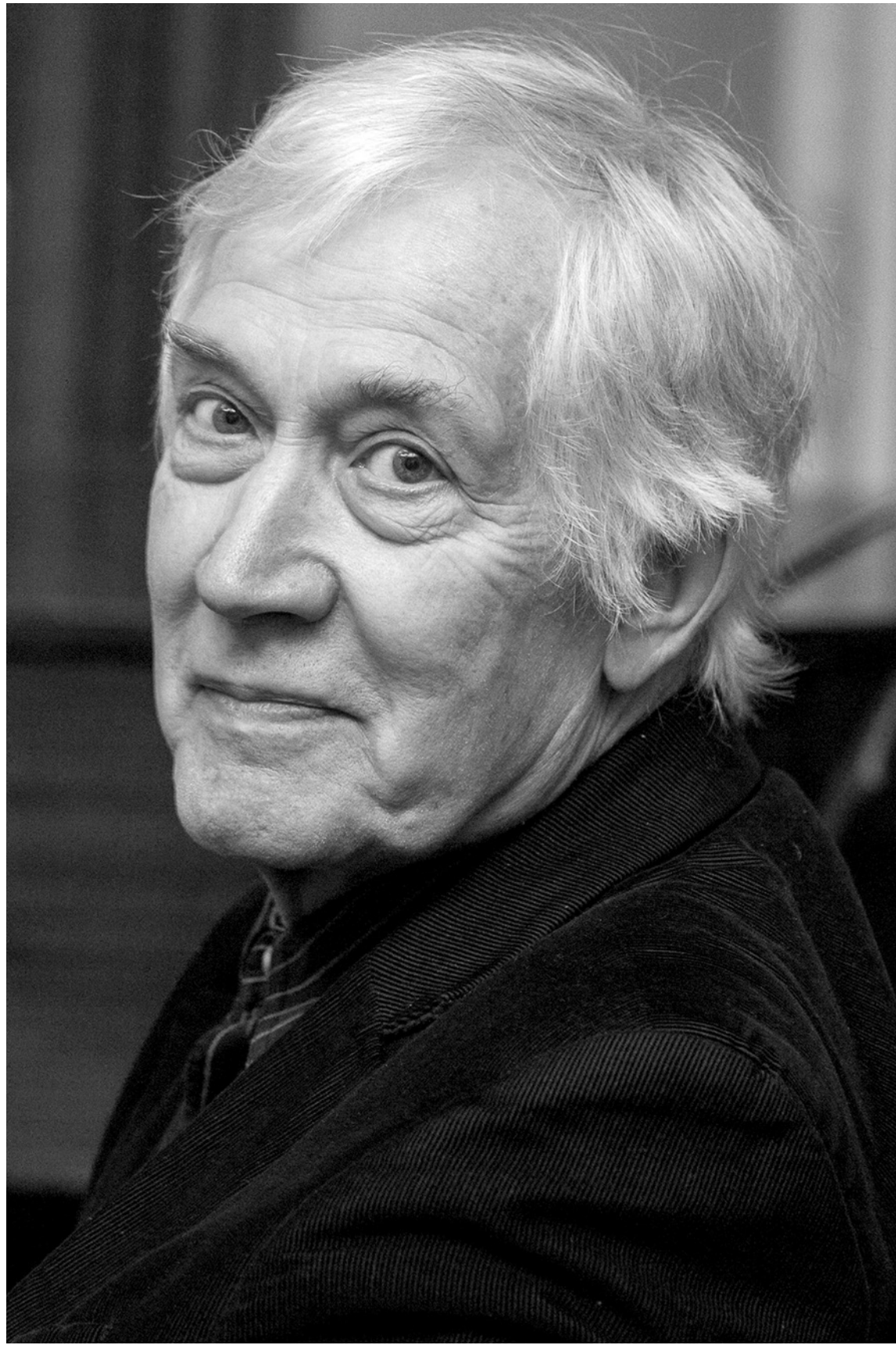
In February 2016, compelling news came out: Jaan Kaplinski had been awarded the European Prize for Literature. The award, which is sponsored by the city of Strasbourg and the French Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs, has been presented annually for eleven years. Laureates are selected for works that have impacted European culture as a whole. The fact that it is an august award is confirmed by the list of recipients, which includes Bo Carpelan, Tony Harrison, Tadeusz Różewicz, Jon Fosse, and Tankred Dorst. Since any international recognition is a banner event for the relatively modest-sized field of Estonian literature, the Estonian Literature Magazine felt compelled to ask Kaplinski a few pertinent questions.

**ELM: The European Prize for Literature sounds prestigious; it has even been compared to the Nobel Prize for Literature. What does this kind of recognition really mean to you; i.e. what has the award brought you? Has it changed your life, and how?**

JK: It's hard to believe that this award is so prestigious. There's been exceptionally little talk of it in European journalism. Comparing it to the Nobel is certainly blowing it way out of proportion. And now, more likely than not, the award will be done away with entirely. So, I will be the last laureate, and while the award previously came with a modest sum of money and was presented at a formal ceremony in Strasbourg, in my case, both the money and the ceremony

were cancelled. Only after I pressed the jury on the issue did they inform me that it was very possible that I was the very last laureate. I'd already been told for two years that I was to be the next recipient, and it was lamentable when it all ended with only an e-mail from the jury saying sorry, the award won't be given out at a ceremony. It's nice that the notice came, regardless; maybe it will help one of my books to be published somewhere in Europe.

**The diversity of your works certainly played a great part in you being awarded the European Prize for Literature. You've written masterful poetry, short stories, novels, essays, philosophical texts, memoirs, and plays. What part of your writing –**





**either a work or a genre – is closest to your heart, personally? What type of form fascinates you the most right now? Or, looking at it in a different way, when addressing your works to what have critics paid the most attention, and what should they have focused on?**

It's difficult to observe and define yourself from a distance. Perhaps I could say that I'm an essayist and a poet with a philosophical slant. I suppose I've worked on that aspect the very most and put the most effort into it. I myself don't see my plays as being that much of a success. Right now, I'm simply working on translating my poems into Russian, and editing my existing translations; at the same time, I'm writing poems in Russian, too. Unfortunately, there's little time for anything else. I suppose that reviewers have noticed the rather frequent irony in my texts too infrequently.

**Readers become aware of your Polish roots in your 2013 memoirs *To Father*. In your blog *Ummamuudu* (In One's Own Way [Võru language – Trans.]), you've written in other languages besides Estonian, including in English and Russian. What role does an author's national or cultural background play in their writing, in your opinion? Or, more specifically: what does being an Estonian writer mean to you?**

My mother and father were true Europeans who studied, lived, and worked in several countries. This might also be the source of my own relative cosmopolitanism. And my education in linguistics has, in its own way,

inspired me to write in Russian, as well as in English to some extent. As a last resort, I've also had to translate the majority of my poems for my two collections published in English. And I've had an affinity for Russian poetry since childhood. The notion of an "Estonian writer" is very hazy, and I personally am not going to bother defining it. I am who I am; I write in the language which I feel close to at the given moment, and I suppose others can decide whether or not it's Estonian literature.

**What sort of literature do you keep your eye on?**

I try to stay up-to-date with the newer and more interesting works in Estonian and Russian literature. And, as time permits, I read the Russian literature that wasn't accessible during the Soviet era (written by Russian emigrants). And, of course, I follow science news very closely: I've written a thing or two about linguistics and ecology, and even a book on astronomy.



JAAH KAPLINSKI AT PRIMA VISTA LITERATURE FESTIVAL • PHOTO BY KRISTJAN TEEDEMA / PM



# Peripheries of (be)longing in contemporary Estonian literature

by Brita Melts

While the topic of confession and a deluge of biographies were items of discussion in Estonian literature during the first decade of this century, the next wave can now be noted: contemporary Estonian literature is undergoing a boom in landscape-centric self-presentation and works that center on the individual. Numerous works describe landscape experiences that are clearly based on autobiographical material, at the core of which are subjects that share biographical details identical to those of the authors. These experiences form a unique subjective model world, a literary mindscape that allows dreams and fantasies to exist alongside realistic details. For the most part, this mindscape is constructed in the immediate vicinity of the author's home or in a place that is meaningful to him or her for some other reason, such as the site of the writer's former home, a country cabin, or a grandparent's home. Thus, the landscape transferred into the literature always possesses a geographical referent that is familiar to the author and recognizable to the native reader. At the same time,

locational descriptions also encompass dreams, sensory manifestations, personal emotions, memory threads, poetizations of a site's inherent features, a very selective attitude towards details of terrain, and the imposition of subjective meanings on the environment, and described just as sharply in the realistic sections are the region's geography, structures, everyday life, documented events, personal thoughts, locals' fates, etc. This is a unique interweaving of documentary and fiction, which carries the author's need to explain his or her ordinary environment and map out meaningful landscapes.

Not only places and landscapes have come into focus, the depiction of mindscales set somewhere in the periphery has become a distinct trend in contemporary Estonian literature. In this way, literature has seemingly antedated the recent grass-roots campaign *Maale elama* (Move to the Country), which aims to encourage youth to find suitable living environments not in cities, but on the periphery, nestled among nature.

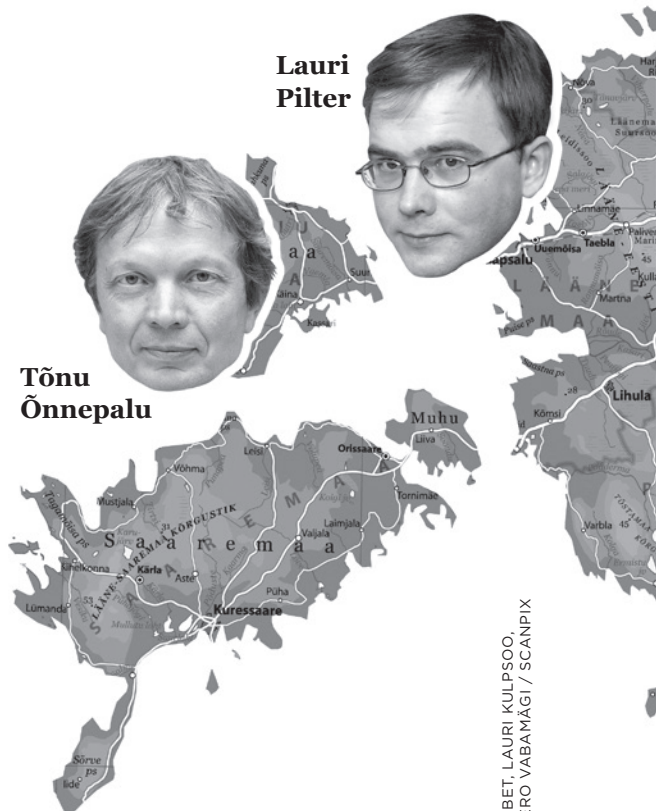
Thus, even literary creativity has fled to a simple and wild environment, to a quiet idyll, demonstrating a forceful detachment from globalization, urban anxiety, and social criticism or socio-urban representation, which dominated Estonian literature until just recently. The search for a genuine, pure and – in a way – elusive world is underway: a sense of perfection found in emptiness is expressed in depictions of the periphery; the most pronounced particularities, coziest qualities, and grounded values of tangled fringes are recorded. With the intertwining of these quiddities, creatively vital images are formed, ones which an outsider's eyes and prejudices have been accustomed to perceiving as hopeless, gloomy, and restrictive. I will provide a few examples of this fresh phenomenon. In doing so, we should note that a circle can be traced around Estonia by placing literary peripheries' and landscapes' geographical mentions on the map of the country and connecting the dots.

In 2008, **Andrus Kasemaa** made his debut with a work of poetry that bears a manifest-like title: *Poeedirahu* (The Poet's Peace). *Poeedirahu* is an imaginary toponym Kasemaa has given to a subjective image of the world, which stands for places in the writer's home region that have become meaningful, necessary, sensorially pleasing, and steeped in experiences. The archetype for this literary landscape is situated on the eastern edge of Estonia, between Lake Peipus and the forests of Väägi, which is corroborated by mentions of geographical features, distances, and places bearing realistic facts and names. Over the years 2008–2012, Kasemaa delineated and expanded his *Poeedirahu* in three books of poetry and one book of prose, which makes

it one of the most systematic geneeses in newer Estonian literature. At the same time, it has become clear that it is impossible to fully and clearly determine the bounds and extent of *Poeedirahu*'s creative-subjective world: these have validity only in the autobiographical subject's mind and may shift since they are formed according to his preferences, likings, and the uniting of places meaningful to him. Additionally, Kasemaa has defined *Poeedirahu*'s central objects and features systematically: it is an out-of-the-way village full of abandoned houses, wandering foxes, and widows. Still, this kind of composition does not come entirely in the form of woeful and marginal place images. Rather, the author sculpts them into a virtue of the site, binding to these elements an attractive and mysterious genius loci that poeticizes the manifestations of ruin. While *Poeedirahu* is depicted as an empty periphery that contains nothing apart from decay and old women, it is these same old women, the widows, who still remember golden days of the past. Their memories have not been tarnished by the racket of the modern world, and within them still flickers something of lost times of happiness, when the beautiful landscapes that surround them were still utilized in a variety of ways and the village was full of lively activity. Kasemaa revives and maps out this lost world; throughout his ramblings across the dreamscape, he discovers merits in this genuine periphery with its emptiness and silence. The location favors the opening of the senses to any and all environmental experiences, to lazing around in a summery place, doing nothing but simply watching the clouds go by, to realizing one's own endless freedom, which is not broken by the drudgery of everyday life.

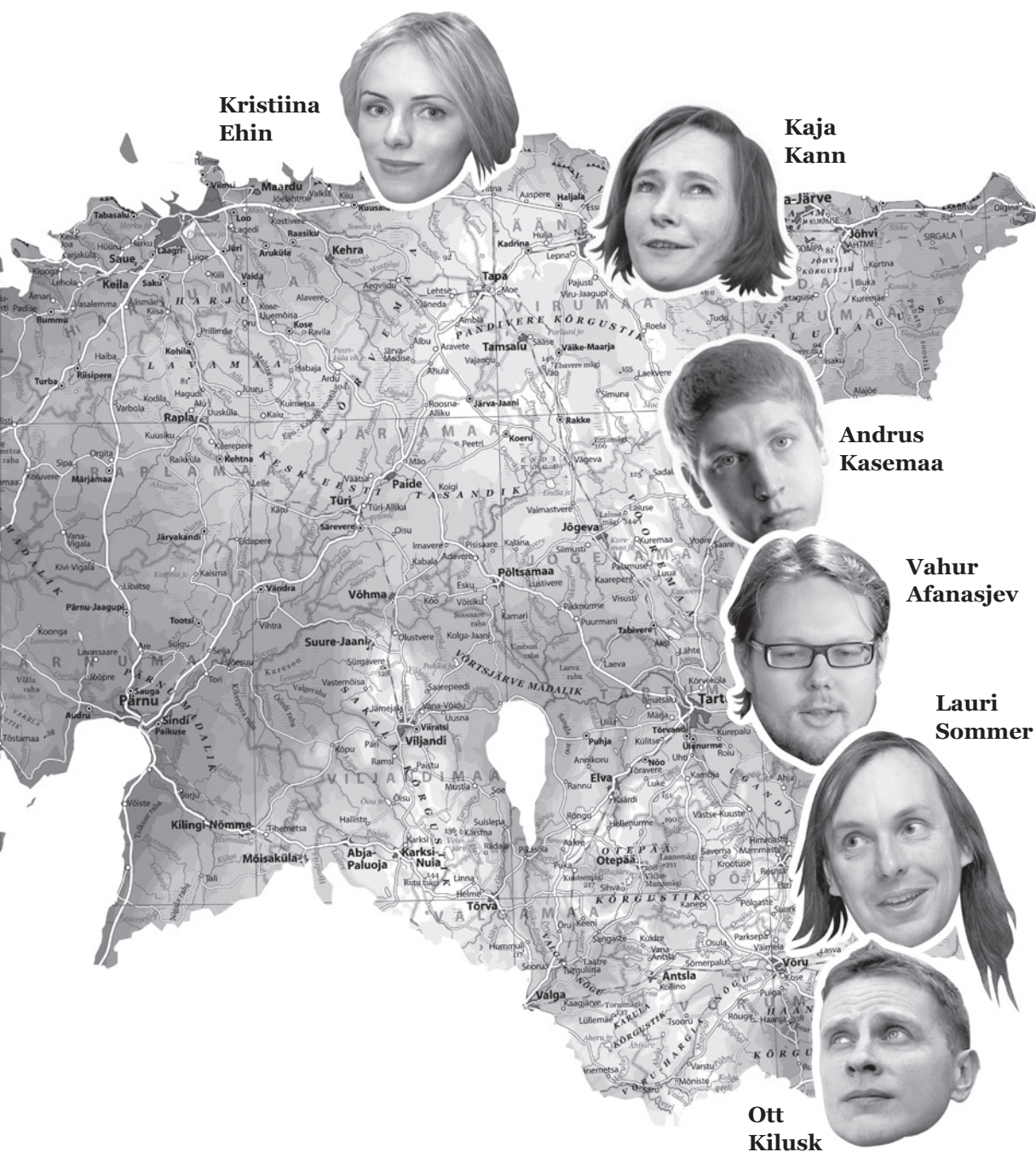
Intersecting Kasemaa's Poedirahu landscape is **Vahur Afanasjev's** poetry collection *Tüsamäe tigu* (Tüsamäe Snail, 2015), which maps out, both geographically and historically, the very same swath of countryside, bounded on one side by Estonia's largest lake and on the other by an immensity of dense forests. However, Afanasjev does not employ imaginary toponyms in his depiction of the periphery: Tüsamäe is an actual place. Neither does the writer live year-round in this real place, but only summers there. Another significant difference is that the subject (or observer/actor) of Afanasjev's poetic world is not the lyrical self, which enables the drawing of parallels to the author, but rather a snail encountering the landscape. Nevertheless, locals' fates (perhaps also those of a widow or two?), buildings' histories, nexuses chosen from the landscape's history, and natural entities emerge from the vicinity of Tüsamäe and bind it into a congruous image of the terrain. Despite the fact that everything is seen from the perspective of a snail, it is all geographically accurate, vividly attested to by the maps and land surveys used as illustrations.

The types of people occupying the periphery largely harmonize with the region's qualities: they are marginalized, somewhat dirty, and are often afflicted by poverty, health problems and vices, particularly a fondness for drink. The events that take place in the periphery are unusual and mainly impossible to imagine transpiring in an urban environment, due to their exotic and repellent nature. They are all the more compelling when observed against the backdrop of everyday rural life, since truly great events happen there very rarely. These qualities are greatly amplified, taken to the extreme,



PHOTOS BY MARGUS ANSU, SVEN ARBET, LAURI KULPSOO,  
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in **Ott Kilusk's** *Bildungsroman* titled *Veidrikud ja võpatused* (Screwballs and Shocks, 2012), which portrays the atmosphere in a tiny village at the farthest edge of the world, placing on the literary map the



settlement of Meremäe, in the far south-western corner of Estonia. There the writer grew up, and there his protagonist does as well, remarking on all kinds of reclamations by nature and degradations both in

terms of landscape and village life. It is all the more interesting to read in comparison with this story an entirely different kind of tale set in southwestern or, more precisely, in southern Estonia, one which



adjoins the region Kilusk depicts, but which lacks his alienating shocks and dread: in *Räestu raamat* (The Räestu Record, 2012), **Lauri Sommer** tells of a place named Räestu in Võru County. The narrative is a quite lengthy, landscape-based history that begins with the grandparents' search for a home, the creation of ancient footpaths, the gradual development of meaningful area, etc. Due to the warm, empathetic tone of the description and the narrator's enthusiasm, every minute detail of rural living acquires unique poetic value; life in the countryside is filled with bright contentment and quiet, happy progress. Sommer's characters are also bright and warm: he offers sweeping sketches of the more important individuals' lives; i.e. those who possess a particular emotional significance. The author's little world of Räestu is far from Kilusk's marginality and discomfort. On the contrary, it is brimming with a mystical enthrallment, an uncommon life philosophy that is linked to the land, with vitality and a poetic interpretation of mundane life.

**Tõnu Õnnepalu** also titled his place-portraying work as manifestly as *Poedirahu: Paradiis* (Paradise, 2009). The autobiographical novel maps out a place called „Paradiis” in Kaleste Village on the western coast of Estonia's second-largest island, Hiiumaa, where the author lived for a dozen years. It is, of course, a subjective portrayal of the place, in which the author includes only the necessary and personally meaningful part of the landscape. The region called Paradiis is a geographically recognizable location with particular features and distances, but it is also a space of emotions, self-observations and memories, in which reflections of the geographical landscapes blend with fantasies and apparitions. As

a result, *Paradiis* (which in a purely geographical sense is the most peripheral of all these aforementioned sites, set next to the sea and on the western fringe of an island beyond which lie only immense open waters) is a brighter place than the other peripheries. Pervading it is nostalgia, the finding of inner peace, as well as the freedom and joy derived from simple things. Unlike the other works, it is physical labor in particular that holds great importance. Perhaps the fact that elements of the literary space include, to a large degree, farming, caring for sheep and fruit trees, fence-building, etc. (all activities that demand time and dedication) results in the image being one of peaceful solitude and concentration, and it is also clearly more idyllic than any of the other peripheries.

**Lauri Pilter**'s landscape depictions are also characterized by a seaside location. Pilter has focused on Estonia's Noarootsi Peninsula – the site of his summer cabin and childhood games – mapping out creative and mental spaces and calling the subjective and condensed result *Airootsi* in his works dating between 2010–2014. In it, we of course recognize references to actual terrains and places, although unlike the other works mentioned here, Pilter has also re-named other locations at a farther distance from his Airootsi. In addition to the subject's own activities, included in the depiction of landscape are digressions that describe people who are unusual and meaningful to the author – stories that explore the individuals' routines and endeavors – as well as the autobiographical narrator's family history. Still, a very important factor that sets the rhythm for the life framed by landscape (aside from the descriptions of simple

rural living) is the author's recognition of Airootsi/Noarootsi's geographical history, in which the site's peripheral nature is emphasized: now a peninsula, Airootsi/Noarootsi was once a separate island, and the terrain betrays signs of this to this day. A soggy, unusable flood meadow now stretches across the former seabed that divided the island and the mainland, which contributes to characteristics of the place and the inhabitants' mentality.

Moving along the fringes towards Estonia's northern reaches, it is our last chance to note that the selective and subject-centric representation of autobiographical locational experiences as a noteworthy tendency in contemporary Estonian literature is not solely the domain of male writers. **Kristiina Ehin**, for instance, has depicted with clear documentary elements her own personal peripheral site, which is just as isolated as Önnepalu's Paradiis: namely, the poet wrote her collection *Kaitseala* (Sanctuary, 2005) on the small, empty, unpopulated island of Mohni, while working as a lighthouse keeper. The work contains observations of nature and of self, yearnings, and fragments of memory recorded in isolation. Spliced between the poems is a "place-diary": dated notes about significant moments on the island. These sketch a rather clear picture of the location and, by pointing out environmental problems, they establish the foremost issue as the pristine quality that is expected of such a place. **Kaja Kann** has written a straightforward place-diary about a place named Pardimäe in Kanguristi Village, located in the northernmost reaches of Estonia. Her work is titled *Eratee* (Private Road, 2013), and in it she describes in detail her everyday activities and goals. What materializes

before the reader's eye is a place at least as devoid of human population as Ehin's Mohni Island: Kann is completely alone in "her Pardimäe", and the setting is primarily limited to her home and yard, describing house maintenance, preserve-making, knitting, garden care, splitting firewood, etc. The location itself may not lie exactly on the fringe, but it is almost as isolated as a small island: the road to it is difficult to find and often impassable due to either rain or snow. This guarantees a quiet life.

It is truly remarkable how newer Estonian literature has discovered, opened up, and even awakened the peripheries, bestowing mental spaciousness and intimate meanings upon the very places that lie at a distance from urban centers and are typically invisible. Peripheries are valued as creative, mysterious, and pristine landscapes, into which purely personal strands of meaning, suggestive snapshots of memory, sources of intimate visions, yearnings, and a poetized sense of belonging can be planted. It is in this way that subjective, out-of-the-way idylls have materialized from the peripheries of Estonian literature: model worlds forged on the basis of the authors' moods, dreams, and wishes; worlds, which clash with globalization and urban space.

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# Some who live the Estonian language

The Estonian Literature Centre has a magnificent tradition of inviting translators of Estonian literature who hail from all around the world to converge on the northern village of Käsnu, wedged between a primeval forest and the sea. The latest grand translators' seminar, which was held in June 2016, was made special by the fact that the Centre is celebrating its 15th anniversary. Altogether 45 translators from 19 different countries – not to mention a large number of prominent Estonian authors – gathered in the village. Literature was introduced, authors discussed their works, and the densely-packed days transitioned smoothly into evenings of music and dance. ELM took the opportunity to ask a few members of the Estonian literary translation family what fascinated them most about their field, and which Estonian authors or literary works they would recommend reading.

## **Cornelius Hasselblatt**

*translates into German*

When asked what the most fascinating thing about Estonian literature is for me, my first spontaneous reaction is: its mere existence and diversity. For, one thing is sure, it is not self-evident at all that such a thing as “Estonian literature” should even exist. This is also an honest answer, because to me all other possible arguments in favor of the exceptional quality or particularity or enormous quantity of Estonian literature seem unacceptable. I have dealt intensively with Estonian literature for over thirty years, and know it better than probably any other literature in the world. Therefore, I can't



CORNELIUS HASSELBLATT · PHOTO BY DMITRI KOTJUH / ELIC

really compare, and I wouldn't dare to say that Estonian literature is more fascinating than any other world literature. What does fascinate me is the language I once began to study for some reason (or languages, rather, as both Finnish and Estonian were my specializations within Finno-Ugric studies), the history and culture connected with it, and it being "different" and, above all, "smaller" than the one I come from. As I love literature as well, it is logical that I've developed a special relationship with Estonian literature. As a result, one finds texts that really seem to be something very unique in the sense that they widen your horizons. Although, I repeat, this does not mean that such texts do not exist in other literatures: I simply have never read Andrus Kivirähk-like texts in any other literature. If you dive into the world of *The Man Who Spoke Snakish*, *Kaka ja kevad* (Poop and Spring), or *Oskar ja asjad* (Oskar and the Things), your world will be changed when you come back to the surface.

**Daniele Monticelli**  
*translates into Italian*

I cannot say I'm an assiduous reader of Estonian literature, and my knowledge of it is therefore far from systematic. Leaving the classics aside and concentrating on recent works and contemporary authors, I find three kinds of approaches in different literary genres particularly interesting. First, in prose, those attempts to make sense of Estonian history and identity which unite a personal style with an internationally appealing, understandable, and universalizable narrative. Novels of this kind range from the grotesque, tragicomic hyperboles of Andrus Kivirähk on the mythical Estonian past (*The Old Barny*



DANIELE MONTICELLI · PHOTO BY DMITRI KOTJUH / ELIC

and *The Man Who Spoke Snakish*) to Rein Raud's *The Death of the Perfect Sentence*, where the dissolution of the Soviet Union is an occasion for a story about human relations and difficult choices. Andrei Ivanov's short stories (e.g. *Ash* and *My Danish Uncle*) and novels (e.g. *A Handful of Dust*) provide unprecedentedly painful images of post-Soviet Estonia from the point of view of the Russian-speaking community. Though they may be difficult to translate, I think that Ene Mihkelson's novels on Soviet repression (*The Dream of Ahasuerus* and *Plague Grave*) are an important addition to international trauma literature.

Secondly, the young generation of poets – Maarja Kangro, Jürgen Rooste, Sveta Grigorjeva, Eda Ahi, Kalju Kruusa and Kristjan Haljak, to mention only a few – strikes me with its writers' acute social critique, on the one hand, and the formal mastery and linguistic playfulness of their poems, on the other.

Finally, with such authors as Piret Raud, contemporary Estonian children's literature offers thrilling narratives that deal with fundamental human values in a peculiarly humorous tone.

My reading suggestions bring us back to the classics. Namely, I have always loved Aino Pervik's *Arabella*, *The Pirate's Daughter*, which was one of the first books I read in Estonian. It is not only an unconventional pirate story, but also a refined reflection on the intricacy of evil, friendship and paternal and filial love: a book for readers of all ages.

### **Bence Patat**

*translates into Hungarian*

For me, *Hősök tere* (Heroes' Square) in Budapest will always be a sort of "Estonian greeting" [*Tere* in Estonian means "hello" – Trans.].



BENCE PATAT · PHOTO BY DMITRI KOTJUH / ELIC

When I started learning Estonian at university more than 20 years ago, I had no idea that I would ever translate literature from the language. The first time I visited Estonia was in 1995 and, as a fan of Fennoscandia, I couldn't help falling in love both with the country and its people. I kept on studying and visiting Eesti (as we Hungarian Estophiles call it), and a bunch of years later ended up translating literary works from Estonian, among other languages.

At this year's seminar in Käsmu (the first such experience for me), it became very apparent that translating from Estonian entails becoming a part of a rather select family: an extraordinary atmosphere that no "big" languages can create.

Estonia with its literature holds a special place in my soul: like an exclusive piece of cake that tastes modern but is still based on an ancient recipe, not really typical of Fennoscandian or Eastern European cuisine, prepared with spices of the Baltic and the Finno-Ugric world by cooks who have professional experience somewhat similar to mine.

One of my recent favorites is Piret Raud's latest book *Lugu Sandrist, Murist, tillukesest emmest ja nähtamatust Akslist* (The Story of Sander, Muri, the Tiny Mommy, and the Invisible Aksel), which is funny and serious at the same time. Along with the illustrations, I also admire her multiple-viewpoint technique, which is not common in "children's" books. It is an enjoyable read for both kids and adults.



## Øyvind Rangøy

*translates into Norwegian*

I am a Norwegian who also lives in the Estonian language, like a rowan sprig grafted onto an apple tree. The tree, which was once separate, is now also in my juice made from miniature apples. The story, which was once distant and merely shimmered on the horizon across a sea and behind barbed wire, is now my own as well. Estonia is, naturally, dirt, water and a collective swine farm. Estonia is also fear, forest and lilacs. Even more importantly, Estonia is the voices of those who make the land either coherent or enrichingly incoherent.

Therefore, the translation and conveyance of Estonian literature is a paradoxically necessary activity for me. When Estonian literature helps me to understand the land and the people that are also a part of me, it feels very personal. When I better understand through its literature my own two

cultures – one in which I was born and another which has been grafted onto me – then it is a unique process of healing a cleaved soul: in other words, integration. If this process also serves as a bridge for someone else, then the phenomenon is all the more welcome.

I don't see what might be regarded as "typical" Estonian literature as holding any significance here. I appreciate that which touches, which moves. I also appreciate that which may help someone to live with a painful and complex history, all the while without becoming a one-topic literature, just as Estonia is not a one-topic country.

My personal reading recommendation would be Mari Saat's *Lasnamäe lunastaja* (The Redeemer of Lasnamäe). It is a short novel that is simple in narrative. With its perspective that is uncommon but – in a certain sense – eternal, the work addresses Estonian society and recent history, as well as general issues of humanity.

## Consuelo Rubio

*translates into Spanish*

... and to the Käsma Peninsula they drove us, oh yeah! A bus full of more or less eccentric translators from around the globe. Needless to say, spirits were high, the expectations were huge, and the organization impeccable. And now you ask me to write a report on what I found particularly enticing? Hardly an easy task. But for the benefit of your distinguished readers, and for whatever these extremely personal and biased opinions may be worth, I'll say that, yes, I had to get my hands on a copy of *Sillamäe passion* (The Passion of Sillamäe) before I flew back to my country, so impressive was the



delivery of the extracts Andrei Hvostov read aloud, and so engrossing was the narrative of what it was like to grow up Russian and Estonian in a rough *barrio* of the East in the eighties. I hasten to add that I thoroughly enjoyed listening to the eternally ironic, nonchalant, self-effacing Andrus Kivirähk speak about his works. Although... wait a minute... Did he really talk about them, or did he just manage to avoid answering the interviewer's questions and at the same time give us a pretty good idea of his vision of literature, of what his *Weltanschauung* is like? Also tremendously enjoyable was listening to and posing for a picture with the always adorable (and always full of "jumping beans" and good stories) Leelo Tungal, whose perfect counterpart is indeed the wickedly clever Maarja Kangro: aren't those short stories of hers perversely funny and deserving of a few smirks? Before I forget, I should not leave out Ilmar Taska, who did an awesome job of presenting his latest novel: half *Bildungsroman*, half cosmopolitan romance in times of war. The

same goes for the amazingly savvy Rein Raud and Kai Aareleid, whose *Linnade põletamine* (We All Fall Down) delves into darkish memories and family secrets, which are, incidentally, very fashionable topics in Spanish fiction and non-fiction these days. Last, but not least, I have been meaning to read Mihkel Mutt's musings for the longest time: a desire that this seminar has only managed to increase. What the heck – one has to give credit to a man who shows up in a light-colored T-shirt, matching denim pants, and a white cowboy hat. His attire was wonderfully attuned to the setting, and it really rocked, just as I am sure his memoirs must get one rocking (and rolling), too.

### Kriszta Tóth

*translates into Hungarian*

I must admit that, although I would gladly work on poetry and plays more frequently as a translator, I mainly translate Estonian prose.

Original Estonian-language prose especially draws me in when the author doesn't simply allow the story to dominate, but rather works with various prose-poetry solutions, when he or she boldly experiments with the text's literary opportunities. This may mean, for instance, playing with the narrator's voice and position, fictionality and possibilities of time and space, using finer humor and irony, or turning the reader's comfortable world upside-down to shake him or her out of the safety zone. In short, when the author gives the reader intellectual work, and with it also the responsibility of being a co-author, to an extent.

Secondly, though, I like when there is idiosyncrasy in an author's sentences and



when they have their own rhythm that can be recognized like a fingerprint. If the author finds something in language that is unique to him or her alone and is capable of packing it into sentences, then that is my author.

These kinds of texts are especially tough nuts to crack for translators, of course. But gnawing such nuts open is what makes a translator's work exciting.

Naturally, my favorite texts – and coincidentally my reading recommendations – are the ones that I myself have translated, because I have delved into them the very most: Tiit Aleksejev's novels *Palveränd* (Pilgrimage) and *Kindel linn* (Stronghold), and Tõnu Õnnepalu's *Mandala*. At the moment, I'm working on Paavo Matsin's *Gogoli disko* (Gogol's Disco). And there are also texts that I would like to translate in



KRISZTA TÓTH · PHOTO BY DMITRI KOTJUH / ELIC

the future: works by Nikolai Baturin, Ülo Mattheus, Bernard Kangro, Karl Ristikivi, Eeva Park, Mihkel Mutt, Jaan Kross, Jaan Undusk and others.



TRANSLATORS AND AUTHORS IN KÄSMU · PHOTO BY DMITRI KOTJUH / ELIC

## **PROPHECY**

*by Jüri Kolk*

An oracle proclaimed to a Theban king  
that he would live a long and happy life —  
not one younger kinsman would slay him.

We would never have heard of him otherwise,  
of course, but that prophecy set the  
other kings into such a spin that they struck  
him dead, the bastard. And they tortured  
him cruelly beforehand. Such a prophecy  
was unheard-of in Greece — it simply had  
to be drowned in blood at inception;  
then, when it was still young; before it  
had grown into a manner of thinking.

*Translated by Adam Cullen*

# Jüri Kolk, seeking the immortal soul

*by Kaupo Meiel*

Just about a year ago, Jüri Kolk, Jan Kaus, Karl Martin Sinijärv, and I were reading our own works and a few by others to a nearly full house in the large community center of the small town of Türi. We took turns, and when Jüri Kolk was up, he announced that he would read a poem that always made him cry.

Jüri read better than ever before and, by the end, unmistakable tears were running down his childishly rounded cheeks. I was sitting next to him and was the closest witness, as a result of which I can confirm with absolute certainty that it was not an act or a performance: Kolk was being genuine, honest, and natural to the core, and his works are equally genuine, honest and natural (although readers can try deluding themselves that the writer wishes to deceive them, and the wish to be deceived is often what motivates us to read books). With Kolk, we cannot be deceived, not in life or in his works, and anyone who feels deceived disappoints me.

## **20 + *n* jobs**

I asked Jüri Kolk (b 1972) for his official CV, but he didn't send me the most correct and exhaustive version. He had something better. Jüri sent me a quick summary of his professional life with added remarks, ending with the sentence: "Kaupo, I recently tallied it up and I've held over 20 jobs."

So, what have these jobs been? They include warehouse worker, logistics director, purchasing director, export specialist at a brewery, and director of a transport service. His experience includes being promoted to department head of a bakery, and in 2005 his colleagues voted him "Employee of the Year" of the Reola company's production unit. Preceding these jobs was a degree in Estonian philology from the University of Tartu, and scattered amid them were a couple of positions in the humanitarian sector: at a translation bureau and as a magazine editor. These latter occupations would be expected of a writer, although they tended to be mere episodes for Kolk.



“I have over 15 years’ experience resolving practical and logistical tasks. I’ve worked in the fields of logistics and purchasing in both the food industry and the electronics industry, and can claim that I’ve handled these tasks wonderfully. I’ve been given promotions several times,” Kolk summarized, beaming with entirely justified pride.

However, the most interesting aspect of Kolk’s professional life is that a few years ago he made the conscious decision to step a few rungs downward on the job ladder, crafting a backwards career. The reason was simple: he needed more time for writing. He does 12-hour shifts, which gives him more free days, even though his workdays are that much more draining. It’s possible that this schedule will turn out to be unsustainable and Kolk will end up at an office job with more regular hours, but at least he will have tried coupling a day job with writing, which is unfortunately possible for very few.

An upstanding member of society, his present positions are shift manager for the beer and soft-drink company A. Le Coq (since 2014), and freelance writer. Kolk’s superiors and colleagues can adequately assess his performance as a logistics or shift manager; literary critics aren’t allowed to go poking around those areas. Luckily, one can determine from a distance that since shops are still fully stocked with beer and soft drinks, Kolk must be doing very good work, and the very same can be said about his literary activities.

## 8 + n books

With writers, you can never avoid trivial questions: Why did you choose the thorny writer’s path? How and why did you become a writer? Jüri Kolk has three answers for me:

1) “Once, when I was just a kid, I discovered in myself the early conviction that I would become a writer. Not that I wanted to, but that I would.”

2) “After a break, I started writing again in 2007.”

3) “At one point, acquaintances started introducing me to others as a writer.”

Jüri Kolk’s debut, the poetry collection *Barbar Conan peeglitagusel maal (ja mista seal rääkis)* (Conan the Barbarian in the Land Behind the Mirror (and What He Said There)), was published in 2009 (i.e. a couple of years after the end of his writing break), and by then he was certainly already being introduced as a writer. You can’t say that Kolk took the literary world by storm with his first work. It was a good debut, but nothing momentous or world-changing. Of course, no one (except, perhaps, the author himself) knew at the time that it would be followed shortly by other poetry collections – a couple of intervening years at first, and far smaller intervals later – as well as by books of prose.

Taken as a whole, Kolk’s works, which are often playful and based on free association, radiate a sense of a determined work ethic. The number of his texts in print and on social media is increasing steadily and consistently. Rivers and streams are steadily flowing into the sea that is Kolk’s writing: some straight, some winding.

When I reviewed Kolk’s third poetry collection, *Seitse surmavoorust* (The Seven Virtues of Death), I remarked that “quantity may not be sufficient proof of quality, but in Kolk’s case, one gradually transitions into





the other and you can tell that the man very clearly knows what he wants, and obviously wants a lot." Now, three years and five Kolk books later, I can state with a sense of relief that I was right.

Might the best verification of Kolk's quality (for which quantity might be, though is not necessarily, a gauge) be the fact that as of today, he has received three prestigious Estonian literary awards: the 2015 Juhan Liiv Award for Poetry (*Arno apooria* (Arno's aporia)), the 2016 Friedebert Tuglas Short Story Award (*Sünnimärk* (Birthmark)), and the 2016 Gustav Suits Award for Poetry (*Mee lakkumine pole meelakkumine* (Licking Honey Isn't Honey-Licking))?

Why not? Especially given the roundabout path by which the awards came, as if juries had just noticed Kolk's works, or else judges believed he reached a high artistic level only over the last couple of years. Thus, the principle that work and tenacity will lead you to your goal seems to be true in Kolk's case but, even so, purely as a reader focused on his writing, the awards are not of the greatest importance.

Kolk himself says he hasn't given all that much thought to the awards, although he's naturally glad to have received them – and they're certainly boast-worthy. He is no incredible aesthete devoid of low-brow cravings, and would undoubtedly like a state-sponsored writer's salary or a Hollywood film contract; however, above all, he hopes to one day not have to have a job and be able to live off of his writing. "And, well, I know a little, maybe incorrectly, the kinds of tricks that would help make my writing please juries, but even so, I don't use them. It might sound haughty, but I truly don't. I'd rather sell my body, because for me literature is important as a hobby, as a love," he says.

And so, creation and loving what you create is most important to him.

### 100 + *n* realities

Kolk asserts that he writes for like-minded people and adds that, above all, he simply writes texts without concentrating on doing it for an audience. He admits that this is partly a mistake, but at least makes sure that references don't stay hidden in his head.

Yes, those references. Both Kolk's poetry and his prose are brimming with them. In



spite of its style, his poetry can be termed “essayistic storytelling” and, when someone tells a story, digressions and quotes inevitably creep into it. The teller doesn’t bother to explain their backgrounds, because he or she assumes that those hearing or reading will understand without explanation.

Thus, in Kolk’s works, we encounter quotes from films, books, proverbs, figures of speech, and lyrics: some verbatim, while others are witty adaptations. Kolk has employed adaptation as a method often in his poetry, breathing new life into earlier works, such as Sergei Yesenin’s poem “Letter to My Mother” and Pink Floyd’s song “Shine on You Crazy Diamond”.

If Kolk’s works are translated, a significant portion of the text is untranslatable because a lot of the wordplay cannot be satisfactorily conveyed in another language. His phrasing is actually simple and fluent, but in order for someone from another culture to comprehend everything, that reader would have to be supplied with explanations. I’m afraid not even all Estonians can understand all of Kolk, although he is no elitist. Faced with the choice of referencing Immanuel Kant or an Estonian children’s song, he will

(automatically) choose the latter; however, it’s not impossible that Kant will be the one singing in Kolk’s story, and will be doing so in some grocery store on the outskirts of Tartu.

A fitting example of Kolk’s referencing, adaptation, and the entire translation-and-explanation issue are two lines from his collection *Igapidi üks õnn ja rõõm* (All Around is Joy and Bliss, 2016). Kolk writes: “social pressure grows high on St. John’s Day / you’re to find a fern blossom, drink and catch a flaxen-haired girl” (p 30).

The Estonian-language lines are perfectly straightforward. Firstly, St. John’s Day (*jaanipäev*) is one of Estonians’ most important holidays: after midnight on 24 June, the shortest and lightest day of the year. Secondly, the lyrics of one popular Estonian song are “grass grows high on St. John’s Day” (*“jaanipäeval kõrgeks kasvab rohi”*), and another popular Estonian St. John’s Day song claims you “sure can’t catch a flaxen-haired girl” (*“linalakk neidu küll püüda ei saa”*). Thirdly, ferns do not blossom (searching for their blossoms is, however, a traditional Estonian St. John’s Day custom), and fourthly, as a consequence of social pressure,

Estonians do indeed drink a whole forestful of alcohol in celebration of the holiday.

Carrying on like this, we could naturally suck the life out of Kolk's works through explanation, but life is the actual subject he consistently writes about (and in every form). In poetry, he mainly registers life; in short prose, he illustrates and sometimes also elucidates it. Kolk's shift from poetry to prose came very naturally, and his experience as a poet is clearly perceptible in his prose style: his thoughts flow freely, his manner of storytelling is concentrated, and his stories frequently end the same way as his poems: with a single-sentence resolution.

Kolk takes his readers to ordinary, even emphatically uninteresting places: to parks, shops, literary evenings, and jogging trails. Sometimes, the narrator wants to beat someone up; sometimes, someone wants to beat him up. And in Kolk's version of Little Red Riding Hood in the short prose collection *Suur võidu jook* (The Great Race, Tuum, Tallinn 2015), the protagonist actually encounters Zeus, who ultimately transforms himself into a swan, whom Little Red Riding Hood feeds a cake, and who, in the end, dies because of it.

There is a constant interweaving of reality and magic (or anti-reality) that surfaces throughout Kolk's works, and before long it's impossible for the reader to figure out what is really happening and what is not. Is there anything unreal about someone actually talking to a wall? There conceptually could be, but when Kolk writes about it, there's not. He first writes reality into anti-reality, then back into reality, and although this may sound pretentious it's very easy for the reader to keep up.

If one were to state something defining about Jüri Kolk, it would be that he is a tucked-away secret of Estonian literature, drifting just below the surface, and to discover it even his compatriots must make a little more effort.

Nevertheless, I'm confident that more and more people will arrive at Jüri Kolk's works and find, to their delight, the extent to which it's possible to nudge the world into place by writing simply and understandably. Further opportunities for this will reveal themselves before long, because Jüri is partway through a novel, has a number of ideas for novellas on hold, is composing a book of short stories, and has started writing different kinds of poems: ones which he says are "moderately un-Kolkish".

In a poem published in Kolk's latest poetry collection, *Igapidi üks õnn ja rõõm*, the narrator asks a busload of glum-faced factory workers: "You haven't happened to see my immortal soul, have you?" It's a good question, which we could also ask others on occasion: Jüri Kolk, for example.

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**KAUPO MEIEL** (1975) is a poet, journalist, and consultant for Estonia's only literature-themed TV show, *Kirjandusministeerium*. He has published four collections of poetry. Meiel's works are characterized by humor, social nerve, and witty wordplay.

## THE GREAT RACE

*by Jüri Kolk*

A turtle decided to race God. He cleverly reckoned that if he had a proper head start, then God would never catch him. It all seemed logical: if God (no matter that He was omnipotent and omnifast) wanted to close in, then He would first of all have to cross half of the distance left between Him and the turtle. Actually (the turtle smiled at this thought), even a tenth would do. And so, when God has crossed a tenth of the distance it takes to run after me, then by that time, I'll have moved a little bit farther —as far as that might be — and that's how it'll work.

He didn't go about finalizing the details with God; in truth, he had never even seen God. The turtle figured that if he started to run right away, then no doubt God would sprint after him, and everything would go according to plan.

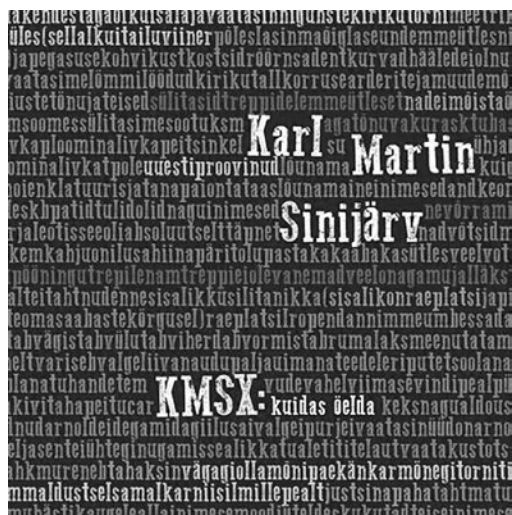
So, the turtle started to run. He ran for an hour; he ran for one and a half; he ran for ten hours; even longer. By the second day, he was already in rather great despair; by the third, his health started to falter; by the fourth, it did. The turtle, drained to his last, died.

And that's how God caught the turtle, anyhow.

*Translated by Adam Cullen*

# Book reviews

by Jüri Rooste and Paul Raud



KARL MARTIN SINIJÄRV · PHOTO: MIHKEL MARIPUU/SCANPIX

## KARL MARTIN SINIJÄRV

KMSX: KUIDAS ÖELDA  
(KMSX: HOW TO SAY)

Tallinn, Näo Kirik, 2016. 96 pp  
ISBN: 9789949980901

Karl Martin Sinijärv (1971, KMS) has been a presence in Estonian poetry for 30 years. Or, to be more exact, poetry has found its place in him. A unique, one-of-a-kind linguistic instinct has revealed itself in Sinijärv. Another Estonian poet who possessed this skill was the literary classic Artur Alliksaar (1923–1966), who utilised the Estonian language to its full extent. He was a magician. The measure

of a language's vitality is indeed the flutter in its peripheries, the manner in which its poetry lives and breathes. Alliksaar lived in a difficult time, and the space for his breathing and expression was very narrow.

Alliksaar handed off the baton to one of the all-time greatest tamers of the Estonian language: Andres Ehin (1940–2011). On occasion, I've wondered whether it's correct to call him a surrealist, which also applies to the greatest ever exile Estonian linguistic experimenter, Ilmar Laaban (1921–2000). They were both alchemists of language in their own distinct ways; the unconscious realm in which they frolicked was a deeper



layer of wild, natural language that exists only as a possibility.

One important ability that comes with this fluency in language is a sense of form, a naturalness with which the authors created even their most complex poetic meters, games and structures. Other notable Estonian masters of this fluency have been Ain Kaalep (1926) and Mati Soomre (1944–2015), the latter of whom even managed to translate into Estonian Lewis Carroll's *The Hunting of the Snark* (for a while, it was unclear whether it really was a translation, or if it was actually some kind of a mathematical-linguistic game). This kind of formulaic capability must be demanded of translators of poetry from time to time, and I would certainly include Tõnu Õnnepalu's (1962) free-form translations of Baudelaire.

Just as important as proficiency in form is the ability to create new language or to warp the linguistic world to one's own whims, whether through syntax, semantics, grammar, word form or word creation. This is an ability as incredible as drawing rain from the sky with a mere glance.

It's not possible for Estonia to be home to many of these types of people, of course, and right now we have exactly one: Karl Martin Sinijärv. He is the only active Estonian writer who I believe is capable of producing nearly every form of poetry in the Estonian language. On top of that, it's a piece of cake for him to pull a new word or linguistic mutation out of thin air. Thus, he is a national treasure and should be placed under heritage protection! That may sound like a joke, but I'm completely serious.

This impressive level of competence naturally places obstacles before translators – just try to create a new expression or word in your own language in a way that is pure and acute. You have to be a real genius. Luckily, KMS' works are extensive enough, sprawling from one extreme of style and form to the other, so there are texts aplenty that can be molded into translation.

Just like some of KMS' earlier works (such as my personal favorite, *Neli sada keelt* (Four Hundred Languages, 1997), which is partially English-language and was written in the US), *KMSX: kuidas öelda* is eclectic. He has more consistent collections, but this work is colorful and intriguing, encompassing slight formulaic bizarreness, punctiliously penned love poetry, almost patriotic verse, poetic-apostolic sermonizing on a par with that of the poet Betty Alver (1906–1989), small-scale absurdity (a series of mini-poems that culminate in questions), classical forms, Juhan Viiding\*-like ditties and, of course, wild thundering: a howl which Allen Ginsberg would approve of. Among other styles, he even manages to successfully pull off “entering”, which has been dismissed as a fad in Estonian poetry. In KMS' variation, a single syllable or a couple of letters are placed on each line (only the king of the most underground of undergrounds in Estonian poetry – the party animal and rogue Raul Velbaum – practices entering with greater severity: a single, sad character was printed on each page of his debut book).

\* *Juhan Viiding (1948–1995), one of the most important Estonian poets of the late 20th century. See: “Six Estonian Poets: Juhan Viiding and others since him”, Estonian Literary Magazine, Spring 2016, pp 14–19.*

Incidentally, KMS' collection does not crumble to pieces. Just the opposite: its eclecticism and light distress form a logical and winding progression and, by following it, we find one of the best books written by KMS to date. Or, as he puts it (again, with almost untranslatable simplicity): "do / as / you / will // take / where / you / need".

The first poem in the work repeats itself meditatively, creating a hypnotic rhythm: "we're a million we've a billion we're a million we've a billion..." What that million might pull off a billion of is discussed throughout the rest of the book, all the way through a 16-page poem that drones at the end, and a final, delicate prayer.

KMS' poetry possesses a kind of warm humor, as well as a humility regarding his own talent for linguistic play as well as for observing our odd, wonderful world: "my son / won't be / conscripted // he's no / astrophysicist, either // he's read / too few books // he's also / short on cash / (he's got as much / as I give) // obviously / a hopeless case // you might tell me / he's only six // but I'd want / everything / and right away".

**JR**

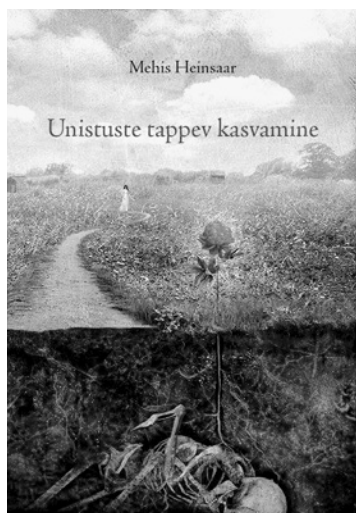
## MEHIS HEINSAAR

### UNISTUSTE TAPPEV KASVAMINE (THE KILLING GROWTH OF DREAMS)

*Tallinn, Menu Publishing, 2016. 232 pp*  
*ISBN: 9789949549245*

Mehis Heinsaar (1973) is clearly a magical realist, but this doesn't mean he is in any way a product of 20th-century literary trends, a copier, or an imitator. Rather, he is a journeyer in a magical world, the map of which somehow coincides with Estonia's own: not so much today's map as that of some enchanting, bygone, fairy-tale Estonia.

*Unistuste tappev kasvamine* is Heinsaar's fifth short-story collection; in addition, he has written one novel, one short-prose work in miniatures, and one collection of poetry. When he made his entrance onto the literary scene, it was clear that a new wonder-child had appeared: even as a very young writer, Heinsaar scooped up almost every Estonian literary award. His first novel, *Artur Sandmani lugu* (The Story of Artur Sandman, 2005), was treated somewhat unfairly by reviewers in my opinion:



MEHIS HEINSAAR · PHOTO BY SILLE ANNUK/SCANPIX

at the time, critics focused on Heinsaar's fantastical world, which had worked so well in his short stories and miniatures. Reviewers felt that Heinsaar's dreamlike world, with its constant metamorphoses, did not hold together well enough in a novel, that it insufficiently served the story.

Yet that particular world creation (both then and today's) is Heinsaar's inherent way of seeing things. How often we demand that writers have their own voice! And how often we accuse of repetition those who have found that voice. Heinsaar is the kind of writer (alongside other magical realists, perhaps?) who is always clearly recognizable. Quite a few devoted fairy-tale fans are unable to refrain from reading his works. They are like literary LSD or magic mushrooms: a fantastical vision of the world which heals the soul. In Heinsaar's new work, he has shifted back to a longer form of writing, which lets us be swept away into the enchanting unknown by his very unique current. Has Heinsaar changed significantly or found a completely new linguistic style in *Unistuste tappev kasvamine*? Nope! His whole former arsenal is present in a special and strong way.

Firstly, there is loneliness. Almost all of the characters in Heinsaar's world – whether they find true love or fall victim to an old witch – are initially alone. Life's great questions lie before them like treasure maps or riddles. They don't gain ultimate closeness or a solution to their troubles from other characters. One of the most beautiful love stories in Heinsaar's latest book describes how every time after making love a woman falls asleep for several weeks, and her husband knows that in her dream-land the woman is with someone else, that she is the

mother of several children somewhere far away in a shepherd family... but she always returns from her dream. The husband waits for her, watches over her, and helps her to readjust again and again. And they are happy, in a strange way. But at the same time, he is also essentially alone. He is in a state of waiting. Many of Heinsaar's characters are waiting for something, but for the most part they must make the first move for anything to happen. And they must do so in a dream.

Secondly, there is an adventure or journey that may be linked to a curse the character suffers from for his or her whole life, or it may lead us to a smidgen of happiness that has to last a lifetime, or to our lost vitality, or... A large part of Heinsaar's adventures are kicked off by inner need, by disquiet. His characters are propelled along their paths because something perturbs them, something calls to them. It might simply be a feeling that sends them on their way, some prophecy or a quest for happiness, but it also might be absolutely real interference by the magical world that leaves them no chance and no choice. The adventure might lead them to a fairy tale forest or to bizarre Estonian communities, which even while appearing completely realistic on the surface change into fantastical places inhabited by bizarre people with bizarre maladies, because, yes, loners and roamers are often eccentrics. So, we could say that, on a larger scale, Heinsaar is an eccentrics' writer.

Thirdly comes his fairy-tale-teller's style – a certain calm, poetic observer's manner, in which the teller (sometimes as the narrator, and sometimes interrupting third-person characters as the author) is never absent.

He is a wandering storyteller who truly drifts through those tales. There are questions of human fate. There is a dark, but childish and natural eroticism.

In the book's title short story, the dream of love helps an electrician infatuated with a woman change into a rain cloud while standing beneath high-voltage wires, thereby (falling as magical rain) allowing him to secretly share his love with his beloved. True, the deception – the illusion – ultimately ruins lives and leads to failure, i.e. the magic doesn't last. But occasionally what matters isn't magic's persistence – its eternal accessibility – but rather the possibility of it. We love because we know that the magic of love is possible, but it can't be obtained all the time. We can't live permanently in a magical high.

In short, Heinsaar's effect may be like that of a drug that douses the world in bright colors. There are dark moments among his stories: "bad trips". Still, I am enchanted by his childish belief in fairy tales: everything really is a little magical. In Estonia, Mehis Heinsaar is one of the greatest writers of his generation. One of his characters remarks that the other side of our lives is like the dark side of the Moon: almost like a secret at first, but when we arrive at it... I certainly feel like I've personally arrived at the dark side of my Moon. In order to get by there, among the lunar seas and mountains, one must have one of Heinsaar's maps – one of his books – in tow... **JR**

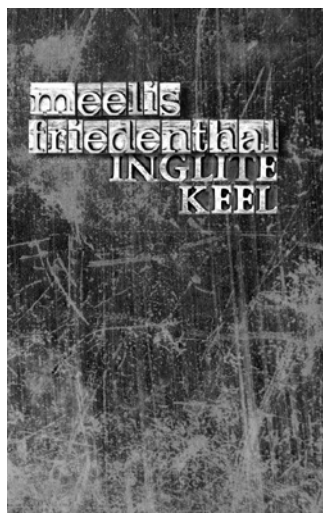
**MEELIS FRIEDENTHAL**  
**INGLITE KEEL**  
**(THE LANGUAGE OF ANGELS)**

*Tallinn, Varrak, 2016. 208 pp*  
*ISBN: 9789985337004*

Meelis Friedenthal (1973) is a prize-winning prose and science-fiction writer. *Inglite keel* (The Language of Angels) is his third novel, and again features elements of history and fantasy. At every step in the reading process, it is clear that the author is a theologian involved in book and library history, and like his novel *Mesilased* (Bees, 2012), which has been translated into a number of other languages, the plot of *Inglite keel* revolves around the university town of Tartu, extending out into the "wider world" by way of historical connections and metaphysics.

If *Inglite keel* were to be made into a film, it would likely fall into the horror/mystery genre, something akin to *The Ninth Gate*, only more Nordically restrained and softer, with a more peaceful trajectory – not intentionally veering into thrills, or prying open the locks of evil. It would be a very muted, Estonian (horror-)thriller for library geeks.

I'm unsure whether or not readers should start with the afterword, which gives explanations and is historically intriguing... probably not. It's always more exciting to find out only at the end of a film: What do you know?! It was all based on "true events", and is within our reach and in our literary knowledge. This also demonstrates Friedenthal's seriousness: he writes out of need, out of an urge. Life has sketched visions of escapades for him, a bizarre world, and to refrain from sharing it would



MEELIS FRIEDENTHAL · PHOTO BY MARGUS ANSU/SCANPIX

be a sin. Yet there have always been dangers in sharing secret knowledge and endeavoring to acquire it, and these are the dangers that *Inglite keel* addresses.

The novel is structured like an intriguing chess problem, although in the first chapter readers may feel like the writer can't be bothered to flirt with them right away because he doesn't immediately throw in a twist, because he doesn't stoke the thrills from the very start; the following chapters dispel this misunderstanding. They create a network, a knotted system of references and intersections that is occasionally even too well-devised. Nothing transpires purely by chance, which intensifies the reader's paranoia: how many more nodes or references are there here that I haven't grasped yet? Will some tiny event turn out to be of crucial importance a couple of chapters later?

In short, there is literary forensic science galore (but not intentionally excessively thrill-ridden) to be found here. Friedenthal's world is stacked with layers of different periods, as well as devices,

events and people that appear and reappear within them. At the core is something very thrilling: a mystical, almost occult 17th-century manuscript, which deals with seeking divine perfection (i.e. the highest form of the human/angelic expression of divinity). Only... isn't that the catch? Aren't demons actually those who speak in that indistinct, lusted after and incomprehensible (but gripping) angels' tongue?

Parenthetically, here lies a broader metaphor: literature as a whole is demonology, in a certain respect. We have convinced ourselves (very deeply and genuinely) that literature possesses some kind of particular manner or opportunity or explanation of existence. And when 20th-century prose reacted to this by ironically warbling about fluff and nonsense, we arrived at the understanding that an ironic way of thinking is a part of that same redeeming force. And we felt that we were a smidgen better and nobler once again, just like Friedenthal's characters discovering their secret, chasing after an old manuscript, or creating that elusive element, both enthralling and magical.



In this sense, I'm reminded of the magician and metaphysician Paavo Matsin (1970)\*, who like Friedenthal can boast of an EU Prize for Literature (not to mention their similar themes and interests). Matsin's world and writing style likewise echo the delicate search for demonism. The experience of reading Matsin's texts constitutes a slightly more dangerous teetering on the brink of murky depths, while Friedenthal's approach is deliberately spiritually whole and clear. It is, in the classical sense, realistic, historical, psychological, plot- and principle-based prose. Still, the novel's plot leads us out onto thin ice: the world we are shown is a bizarre mirage, although the manner of narration is not. I might add that the good old, safe canon of realism – presented in a very accomplished style in this case – is precisely what enchants the reader.

In the story, the tired old metaphysician and alchemist Michael Maier tells the younger, more ambitious Salomon Maius, who is on a passionate quest for a perfect form of expression to be found in a book: "Right now, I feel more and more that we must agree with Trithemius' idea. Alchemy is a maiden whore; she yields to no man's embraces, ever. Those who reach her leave empty-handed. That which you have acquired, you have lost. The fool turns mad, the rich man poor, the philosopher a babbler, and the proper man loses any sort of propriety."

You could say that Friedenthal's main characters – the Aaron family, who are kind, wise, and soft-spoken old researchers of

paper and print history – indeed embody a quiet rationalism. They knowingly avoid any kind of demons or dim reaches, performing their immense task with solemnity, pecking away at what is seemingly trifling, and in doing so recognizing that ignorance of some things is sometimes better. Or, on the contrary, remembering certain things is better. The story revolves around the Aarons' lost and re-found archive, as well as an old document within it that is strangely alluring (an archive somewhat similar to this truly did disappear in Estonia), showing how demons (or angels?) attract us, beckon us to join them, and spell out our doom.

Incidentally, the book's younger, modern-day characters also encounter the inevitable: the library security guards regard physical laborers as somehow better than those who peck away at nothing; irritated for instance by that rare archive being left out in a hallway, in the way of the honest working-man. It seems to me that really is the case, even with reading nowadays! Most of humankind has grown a nice, thick skin, and won't be drawn by demons or angels into the pages of dusty books anymore. Those who allow themselves to be lured by the flight of shadows or light have to acknowledge on their own what they're settling for.

Friedenthal has written sensitively, consciously, and with presence, as if penning a fascinating academic study which for some reason couldn't be submitted as a scholarly work. It is a mild thriller for the reading and thinking person. I certainly can't say the ending was unexpected (is it an end at all?), but that's of no consequence. Rather, I was disappointed that the little knot was unraveled so quickly and tossed in with other tangles. **JR**

\* See the review of Paavo Matsin's prize-winning work *Gogoli disko* (*Gogol's Disco*, Estonian Literary Magazine, Spring 2016, pp 45–46).



P. I. FILIMONOV · PHOTO BY PEETER LANGOVITS/SCANPIX

## P. I. FILIMONOV

### LAULIS, KUNI KÕIK LÕPPES (SHE SANG TO THE END)

Tallinn, Varrak, 2016. 312 pp  
ISBN: 9789985334539

*Translated into Estonian from the Russian  
by Ingrid Velbaum-Staub*

For ethnic Russians living in Russia, Russian-Estonian culture isn't even a proper diaspora. If only it were across the Big Pond – but right here, in their former colony?! And they're writing things?! It's possible that is how Russian-Estonians see it, too. Proper Russian literature is written over in Russia, not here in Estonia. I should ask P. I. Filimonov (1975) himself, but perhaps assuming that his books currently reach Estonian-language readers more than they do Russian-language readers is justified. So, what on Earth is the cultural space in which he lives and breathes?

In any case, P. I. Filimonov is living and breathing just fine, since his novels and poems are widely published in both Russian and in Estonian. Furthermore, he is a remarkable performer – a true performance-poet with his own signature voice

and manner, and he occasionally even takes the stage with a band. In some sense, as a result of his sarcastic sideways glance or being at his own level, Filimonov makes the process of categorizing his new book *Laulis, kuni kõik lõppes* simple, even though the text itself seems to resist any kind of categorization at all. Simply put, it is a sort of postmodern novel in which misleading or guiding allegories constantly jostle us and the protagonist away from the main plot. It is a science-fiction story that also addresses lethargy, intellectual anxiety, and literary being.

The protagonist is 27-year-old Olympius – a young Russian-Estonian whose relatives task him with caring for his dying grandmother. Not that he is against the task: the work is certainly demanding, but it has its bonuses, such as material ease, a certain opportunity to not have to hustle and face the daily grind in competition-based society, a sense of enjoyment from knowing that he is being somehow altruistic, etc. Yet, things aren't so simple. His grandmother draws him into her surrealistic stories, truly sucking our protagonist into bizarre narratives (is she telling them or showing him

magically?); at the end of each, Olympius' own presence or role in the allegory is always revealed. Or, alternatively, he is engaged in a spirited game of track-covering (does this help the reader catch a whiff of the novel's secrets, or does it purposely make everything more playful and complicated?). The grandmother simply grabs him by the hand, and he's instantly gripped tight by the storytelling. All of the tales are a little strange, even brutal. Olympius becomes a character in various eras, in different psychological roles, in alternating nightmares and perversions. In the end, he always finds out who he was in the given story (such as a narrator who is pathologically in love with his twin brother).

On top of all this, it is soon revealed that the building in which Olympius' grandmother – who is trapped in the spirit of the communist era – lives (or, to be more precise, dies over the course of the book) is starting to slip into a hole in time together with the nearby blocks; to detach from the world familiar to us. Thus, the characters are in danger of becoming caught in a gap in time.

The novel can be read as an existential literary joke: at some point, it seems like Sartre-like disassociation has been brought to a pinnacle. The main character certainly cares for his grandmother mechanically and through motor memory, but his soul is callous. He is indifferent to everything, which is conveyed through a certain lackadaisical prism: horror forces him to do things; it's easier that way... But this doesn't last. In addition to a sense of responsibility, a special kind of caring germinates within him (if it hasn't been there all along). It is as if he breaks the law he himself has repeatedly confirmed: that we, as humans, are all lackadaisical clods. Filimonov's book can also

be read as an entirely sincere contemplation of existential problems, morals, extreme situations, and isolation; it doesn't matter that the author provokes us all too often with dark humor and the protagonist's worldview: one that extends to nihilism, although timidly.

Humor – a cocktail of deep intellectualism and entirely out-of-place crude comedy – is Filimonov's main tool. So, despite its tortuous agitation, dark events, and nightmarish atmosphere, *Laulis, kuni kōik lõppes* is also a very funny book.

The work can be read as an existential discussion just as it can be read as science fiction (not that one inherently negates the other): all the good requirements for a work of fantasy have been established. And not only established, but successfully accomplished, too. Although we may interpret the entire story as a bout of madness suffered by the protagonist, signs point more to some kind of Scythe of Time or Steven King-like idea. It is a place with frozen air and energy, “as if time stood still”, and which indeed turns out to be a tumbling off the brink of time, away from our everyday lives... There is also a very significant and unreal note to the book's “maggot plot-line”. Specifically, it's revealed that maggot-alien's nest in our brains if given the slightest chance: one part of their grand plan for world domination. Among other tidbits, it turns out that a maggot lives in Putin's brain, also. There is dimension and breadth to the work; it doesn't matter that most of its scenes seem to unfold in a stuffy Stalinist apartment, which has furthermore been left out of the stream of time.

Another important part of Filimonov's writing is the way in which he handles a

special aspect of masculinity: the image of manliness. This surfaces repeatedly in both the central plot and in several side-stories: constant emphasis is given to the particular ways characters are a certain type of “real” man. He observes how they think, how they view women, how they interact, become fathers, and buddy up.

Filimonov’s network of references, well-read background, familiarity with history, and ability to approach the “wisdom” scattered throughout it with (self-)irony make the novel quite unique. Still, I would advise translators to keep the Russian-language original at hand and work from it, since the Estonian-language version displays signs of rushed work and possesses influences from Russian-language structure and word order.

In some sense, *Laulis, kuni kõik lõppes* is an irritating, grating, William Burroughs-like work of absurd fantasy; on the other hand, it is a mellow narrative, a light jab at the topics of status-quo literature, which asks what we are doing here in the first place, how it all appears outwardly, and how pitiful we can be. It’s a shameless book: what else can I say?

**JR**

## **SILVIA URGAS**

### **SIHT/KOHT (DESTINATION)**

*Tartu, Elusamus, 2015. 48 pp.*

*ISBN: 9789949387083*

Silvia Urgas (1992) is one of Estonia’s newest poets, whose literary path began with the youth literary journal *Värske Rõhk*, which perennially unearths new and intriguing authors. Urgas made her debut in the journal with a prose piece which earned her the Tartu Literary Festival’s Prima Vista Debut Award. It is worth adding that, in 2014, Urgas was a nominee for the PEN International New Voices Award.

*Siht/koht* is Urgas’ debut poetry collection. Lately, the Estonian poetry scene has been stocked with so many mature and unexpectedly talented new writer that her masterful first collection is not surprising in terms of its polished quality. Rather, it is one more sign that young poets are putting more and more effort into their works, and demonstrates that perhaps a tradition of longer writing sessions is gradually taking shape, one in which authors don’t rush straight out to publish the first words they get down on paper. The collection is coherently written and organized with a great degree of care;



SILVIA URGAS · PHOTO BY KRISTJAN TEEDEMA/SCANPIX

no doubt a debut book often determines the author's future creative course and opportunities. One may also state with absolute conviction that Urgas' first collection has received a positive reception. Estonians are writing and talking about *Siht/koht*, and it (deservedly) stands out among other works.

Tartu, the city's various locales, and its unique pace of life radiate through Urgas' poetry, sometimes in the foreground, sometimes not: "annetown is the gods' town", "light of white evenings / on the lot between two apartment blocks". While the city itself isn't explicitly mentioned, its atmosphere is evident. Luckily, Urgas' poetry is not difficult, confusing, or boring to read even if one isn't familiar with Tartu in great detail. What matters is Urgas' attitude towards the spirit of Tartu: not specific locational descriptions or local inside jokes. One gets the impression that the place itself isn't important, that the author's observations and rapturous drifting from one place to another would be interesting if she were moving about Tallinn or New York.

Urgas has spliced into her poetry a wealth of references to 1990s Estonian culture and pop music. Her poems are characterized by a pop-music quality in general. Several plays on word meant to ease the serious tone can be found, seemingly written as effectively dumb jokes: "I've got no sakharov / I haven't even got sugar substitute"\*, "and at the end of every biting remark / a couple more worthy of erich maria". Urgas is a good poet, but at the same time does not appear to regard writing as incredibly sacred and does not set "serious" writers apart from the

rest. "I'm really annoyed by that class difference between pop culture and the 'real' arts. It seems very narrow-minded when somebody who sees him- or herself as intelligent writes off a person's entire past and future because the individuals' hits are played on mainstream stations, or because that person posted a naked selfie on Instagram," Urgas said in an interview in *Värske Rõhk*. Even so, that doesn't mean she believes writing itself is unremarkable: "but if I don't have to write poems / then why've I a head at all". Urgas simply approaches writing with a certain idiosyncratic sarcasm.

The young author's poems are colored by her strong sense of self-irony, modesty, and self-dismissal: "and the price stuck to me / is so ridiculously small", "fold me up and take me along / from march-heat to may-malaria / the creases are already there". In contrast, though, the author ascribes importance to the world and everything else around her: "I'm afraid the universe / actually couldn't care less about me", "I slip past before the patriarch pushes the shutter release / I don't see how I'd fit in the picture". It's very pleasant to see a poet with a more intriguing take on life at a time when others are generally experimenting with form and themes or merely churning out pretty words without having a unique, exciting view of the world. *Siht/koht* is Urgas' emotional drifting (or outright delaying) through life: memories of moments which seem simple on paper but may be important in the shadow of their ordinariness, and stay with the reader. In any case, new and increasingly better works can be expected from Silvia Urgas. Although "all letters / that we use / are long since dead" and "we can't understand / how short a t i m e can be", Urgas herself still has a few letters and a little more time. **PR**

\* *Andrei Sakharov (1921–1989) – physicist and activist, awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1975; "sakhar" – sugar in Russian.*





JAN KAUS · PHOTO BY LIIS TREIMANN/SCANPIX

## JAN KAUS

### LÄHEDUSTE RAAMAT (THE BOOK OF CLOSENESS)

*Tallinn, Verb, 2016. 72 pp*  
ISBN: 9789949969067

The miniature, just like many other forms of short prose, is underappreciated in both Estonian and global literature. Authors who write novels – not novellas, short stories, or miniatures – are chiefly regarded as “serious” writers. Therefore, in the context of Estonian literature, Jan Kaus (1971) proves that good writers can also handle concise forms, and can receive prominent awards for such texts. Kaus won the 2014 Cultural Endowment of Estonia’s Award for Prose not only for his latest novel *Ma olen elus* (I Am Alive), but also for his second collection of miniatures, *Tallinna kaart* (Map of Tallinn).

Various forms of short prose comprise a very large part of Kaus’ works. The short-story collections *Üle ja ümber* (Over and Around, 2000) and *Õndsate tund* (Hour of the Blessed, 2003) came at the very start of his career. Kaus’ recently published tiny book *Tõrv* (Tar, 2015) was classified as

short prose. However, the roots of his miniatures lie more in the prose poems found in his collection *Aeg on vaha* (Time is Wax, 2005). His first collection of miniatures, *Miniatuurid* (Miniatures), was published in 2009, and stood out for the form used. The next miniatures were *Tallinna kaart* in 2014 and *Läheduste raamat* in 2016. It certainly may not be a universal opinion, but in my view Kaus is a master of literature’s short forms. Everything in his novellas and miniatures is in exactly the right quantity, while in his novels, there is just a little too much of that “something”.

*Läheduste raamat* differs from its two older brothers in several respects: firstly, in terms of the choice of topics. *Miniatuurid* is thematically divided into several parts, with the author alternating between writing about anonymous towns, museums, the media, people close to him, and different sites around Estonia. Kaus’ second collection *Tallinna kaart* is not as fragmented: every compact text tells about a place in Tallinn that any experienced resident of the capital has visited, as well as the author’s feelings or thoughts associated with that location. *Läheduste raamat* is an exception

in the sense that every text addresses the phenomenon of closeness, which Kaus defines rather vaguely.

Concluding the author's latest work is the much longer text *Kiri* (Letter), which is informal and which Kaus describes as "not a love letter, but a letter about love". In it, he clarifies the closeness of focus throughout the work as follows: "Maybe there exists some kind of objective spirit, an invisible field which we occasionally share. We share it when we feel closeness: not only love, which is one form of closeness. We share it when we feel something instinctive, a need for another person's closeness, which leaves a deep mark. And here, all possibilities are open." Every one of Kaus' miniatures is indeed this type of manifestation that describes instances of closeness, whether they are associated with a particular person, place, memory, or something entirely different. Many readers often wonder whether that which Kaus details in his texts has actually taken place in reality. This is not important, in my opinion, and is especially unimportant in the case of Kaus' miniatures. What matters is that the text has an effect. The focus in the author's earlier collections of miniatures was on provoking and emotional moments, although the framing was more precise. Because of its thematic liberty, *Läheduste raamat* probably allowed Kaus more freedom in his writing; at the same time, it may startle readers already familiar with his short prose, and necessitate a more thorough reading than of earlier works.

This all clearly implies that *Läheduste raamat* was written for particular readers who enjoy slow contemplation and a narrator's inner monologue, and who are not seeking blood-curdling excitement. Kaus

even has his imaginary companion speak up on the topic: "...they could have a touch more spark and spice – why don't you write stories that might train the reader's gaze like a burning fuse until the climax explodes in their face?" Re-reading the author's earlier novellas might evoke this same question in many readers, but Kaus offers a response: "I don't know. I'll say that life is ordinarily a much paler, homogenous mass; something like plain cottage cheese. In life, stories mostly end with a sizzle or a hiss; things are left unfinished and unresolved." A little later, he continues: "But there seems to be one problem with realism: it expends itself too quickly." This last statement seems to be generally true.

*Läheduste raamat* demonstrates that Kaus' style continues to be polished and provocative. His metaphorical and nuance-rich language is some of the most masterful to be found in Estonian literature. So many writers have exhausted themselves handling the same topics, but not Kaus. Even the most unremarkable details become meaningful and evocative in his expressive manner. Kaus' prose continues to develop and improve with each and every work. **PR**

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

**PAUL RAUD** (1999) is a literary critic who has also written short stories. Raud runs the cultural youth blog *Kaktus*.

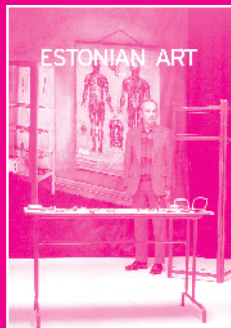
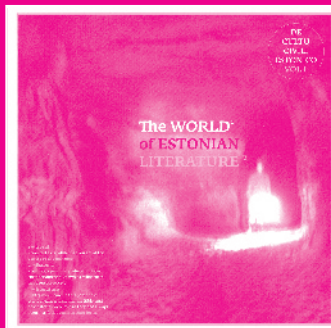
# Estonian culture and literature

The Estonian Institute has been mediating Estonian culture to the world since 1989. Besides the traditional fields of art and cultural exchange, we cover society and nature, lifestyle and heritage in general. Institute has offices in Helsinki and Budapest.

Institute is the partner for teaching Estonian language in several universities abroad and in Estonian communities across the world. Our various web and paper publications describe contemporary culture, history and creative environment of the country.



The Estonian Literary Magazine is the only English-language publication introducing Estonian literature. The first ELM was printed in 1995 and has since been published twice a year. Earlier issues of ELM are available at [elm.estinst.ee](http://elm.estinst.ee) and [estinst.ee/est/estonian-literary-magazine](http://estinst.ee/est/estonian-literary-magazine)



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