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MORE INFORMATION SOURCES:

ESTONIAN INSTITUTE

Eesti Instituut

Suur-Karja 14, 10140 Tallinn, Estonia

Phone: +372 631 4355

www.estinst.ee

ESTONIAN LITERATURE CENTRE

Eesti Kirjanduse Teabekeskus

Sulevimägi 2-5

10123 Tallinn, Estonia

www.estlit.ee

ESTONIAN WRITERS' UNION

Eesti Kirjanike Liit

Harju 1, 10146 Tallinn, Estonia

Phone: +372 6 276 410, +372 6 276 411

ekl@ekl.ee

www.ekl.ee

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Editor: Berit Kaschan · **Translator:** Adam Cullen · **Language editor:** Robyn Laider

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A Perfect Day

by Eva Koff

“A Perfect Day” is a new ELM column, in which individuals associated with literature in Estonia share their recipes for a perfect day. The first featured author is Eva Koff, Estonian Writer of the Year 2018, whose sensitive and elegant novel *The Blue Mountain* (2017) has received several awards.

A perfect day. Today. It's ten o'clock, the morning sunlight has left the kitchen, but the radiance of the yellow walls fills you with that much more hope. The kids have been sent off to school; you waved at them from the window and fell back into bed. *Poor kids*, you think as you wake up, then make coffee. A few books are scattered on the windowsill. They are *The Brothers Karamazov*; it is Pyotr Aleshkovsky's *A Fish*, or Henry Marsh's *Do No Harm* that await you: here I am, a whole world on slightly print-smudged paper. Today, someone has topped the stack with Harms' *An Unexpected Bender* and a thick, black work by Juhan Viiding. Neither even need to be opened: the “loaf of Polish bread” pokes out from between the covers and lines from the latter proclaim: “I've made no sense; I've made some sense, too.”

You read for a good hour or so. There's no need to fret: the day is still ahead of you. Even so, a nagging sense of guilt slowly sprouts. At this time on a real day, you'd open your laptop, reply to the e-mails you can answer briefly, and think with gentle regret about the people to whom you'd like to write longer letters; for whom you'd like

to *take time*. And, on a perfect day, you do take that time. You filter out the thoughts you'd like to echo back from that letter, and you write. Your ideas flow and your sentences are alive.

It's the middle of the day. The cat stretches on the armchair. You go out for a walk, strolling down Heina Street towards the Kopli district. To your right is the railroad, obscured by a line of leafy birch trees and where not a single train rumbles anymore; to your left, lilacs behind fences flood the air with their scent. You stroll and inhale them through your nostrils. The intersecting streets are flowery to their core, with names such as Timothy-grass, Stalk, Greens, and Plant. The dusty former industrial zone has become a literal *Pelgulinn*, a city of refuge, where the birds chirp and dogs bark in the yards. You make your way back along Clover and Straw streets. Before arriving home, you pass Kaja Pizza, which is said to make “Tallinn's best pizza”. Perhaps.

At home, you make a cup of green tea. You don't open e-mails, but instead a file containing a play you're co-writing with Indrek.

One that speaks of Portugal's spirit and Estonia's spirit and what unites the two. The distant oceanic land is right here in this room, beneath the metal roof in Pelgulin; surfers and fish crisscross your computer. A new scene emerges, one that is unexpectedly vibrant and authentic. You hit the right note: it's a perfect day. Lining up letters – in the perpetual deleting and replacing lies joy, excitement, freedom.

You've had to eat meanwhile: dark bread, tomato, dill, egg, butter. The warm yolk spills across the plate. Perfect. Man doesn't need much in this mundane life.

The kids come home from school, from practice. They've had a great day. They're bubbly. And since your pen has also had a good (a perfect!) day, you're prepared to listen. You open up the channels and tune in. While you do, you cook soup, stew, and the boys' favorite: macaroni. They take turns talking, then all at once. *Moomintroll* is the littler ones' bedtime story: "It was a new gateway into the Unbelievable, into that great Possibility; it was a new day in which anything could happen so long as you had no problem with it happening." One can easily journey to dreamland in peace with thoughts like that.

I make a pot of herbal tea, Indrek and I chat softly (there's no door between us and the sleeping children). We talk about our play and today and tomorrow and life and living. It's 12:01 am, and it feels as if we've been granted another day. A poet with the words: *there's time, I believe. It shouldn't run out.*

A fantasy of a perfect day, of peace on earth. Achievable perfection is ultimately no more



EVA KOFF · PHOTO BY KRIS MOOR

than our imagination and endeavor, isn't it? But what is it that we truly need in this world, which we cannot and should not keep solely to the realms of our dreams and fantasies... "*Once, there was a king without a kingdom or a crown. And so, that king lived beneath the great blue sky...* ". In Jaan Kaplinski's poem, the king acquires his coveted kingdom and crown in the end, but in a completely different way than how he'd expected. Yes, a perfect day would be no more than a lifeless construct if it had no *problem*: one little crack, a single question that gnaws at you, a moment of fear (perhaps this beauty and fortune won't last for long?), or the knowledge that life is borrowed and its return date creeps closer with every perfect day. Yes, such is life, and that is why you seize the day: both the perfect and the ordinary.

A small assortment of the estonian new drama competition's tastiest treats

by Mihkel Seeder

Estonia is a land of theater wonder, with sublime plays that are like Estonian chocolates: once you've opened the box, you can't stop eating.

I like the myth that Estonia is a land of theater wonder. Firstly, because it confirms that as someone who works in theater, I've made the right life-choices and am contributing to a field that is growing and blossoming. Secondly, because the myth seems to imply that Estonians are an unusual people: a people who tirelessly attend the theater. A people who love theater more than any other. Statistics back this "myth": over the last couple of years theater attendance in Estonia has crossed the one-million mark, which is an astonishing accomplishment from a global perspective. More and more new theaters are popping up and it's often difficult to acquire tickets to the old ones. Newcomers are experimenting with more and more novel theatrical forms, while veterans continue crafting high-quality productions.

A similar richness is present in playwriting: every year, close to one hundred new and

original works are staged in Estonia, which means that (theater) writers, production playwrights, and actors/directors who write are up to their necks in work. One would furthermore be hard-pressed to find anyone who manages to attend every new production (or even manages to read every new original play).

Drama – what for, and for whom?

For me, the central issue when discussing drama is the author's intent: are they creating an independent work of art or a theatrical base text, the primary goal of which is to inspire playwrights and actors to stage a production? Which is to say: is the piece written for the reader or for the director? Another type of writing has recently enjoyed success in Estonia: several exciting productions have sprung up from cooperation between playwright and director.

I, however, have developed a certain fetish: I enjoy reading drama. Naturally, I likewise enjoy going to the theater, and it's difficult to imagine anything more powerful than a touching performance. At the same time, reading certain works of drama can provide a similar, if not even more intense, experience. The slim form and briskly-moving structure of plays make them easy to read. Furthermore, they are a way to get a glimpse into how and of what a playwright is thinking. An original Estonian script generally finds its way to the stage as such: a director has an idea and tells a playwright about it. Together, they discuss possibilities for how the story could be executed, and the author puts together a draft for the first rehearsal. Ever more often, this undergoes a thorough revision during the rehearsal process, in which members of the theater troupe are already participants. The playwright contributes to this process foremost with his talents, not his ideas. I'd like to stress that I do not regard one option as better than the other: both methods can boast remarkable outcomes. If, however, one wishes to enjoy direct contact with the playwrights themselves, then there is no better way than by reading the entries submitted to playwright competitions.

Visions of the future and alternative histories

The Estonian Theater Agency's biyearly New Drama Competition, which began in 1995, has become a sustained, thriving event that produces thrilling plays and unearths new authors. It is an ideal opportunity for authors to tell their story in the exact form they wish. Entries must stand on their own two feet. It's not possible for authors to hide behind a director or any

other crew member. The piece either works, or it doesn't.

I've come across very many compelling features while reading competition entries over the last three years. Standing out foremost is the abundance of sci-fi/fantasy stories, which one rarely encounters in the context of Estonian theater. **Loone Ots' *The Gerontes, i.e. The End*** and **Karl Koppelmaa's *Troll, i.e. Socrates Must Die*** depict dystopian futures, urging us to notice the unsettling processes happening around us even now. Koppelmaa, a young playwright and director, went a step further with his visions of the future and won the joint Baltic states competition "Talking About Borders" with his play ***Green Like Singing***. A fascinating story comprised of monologues, ***Green Like Singing*** features several characters sharing their memories of Sebastian – a man who impacted their lives at a time when the whole world finally went crazy and World War III began.

Olev Remsu's alternative-history play ***The President*** can also be added to the sci-fi list. The drama focuses on one of the most influential and controversial Estonian heads of state – Konstantin Päts – and, as alternative histories do, offers yet another interesting way to interpret the past. The four given works are treats for all fans of "high-concept" and "as-magic-as" stories, and may also be a sign that science-fiction will take the stage in Estonia with increasing frequency.

Unusual trials of ordinary people

Naturally, the body of winning entries is not without its "small stories" that tend to focus more on the unusual trials of ordinary

people. **Piret Saul-Gorodilov's *One in the Pocket***, the winner of the 2015 competition, is about a young mother who moves into a former kolkhoz apartment building, which today has come to symbolize bleak periphery: a communal dwelling in the middle of nowhere. Although the protagonist is convinced the father of her child will ultimately come for her, the reader (or viewer) wonders how long she will be able to keep that faith alive in such a gray environment with no prospects. Saul-Gorodilov stuck another win in her pocket in 2017 when her radio drama ***Prevention*** came in first place in a competition organized by Estonian Radio Theater. *Prevention* is a fantastical story about a woman lying on an operating table who experiences bizarre adventures while anaesthetized.

Piret Jaaks' *Sirens*, which took second place in the Estonian Theater Agency's New Drama Competition, similarly wanders the fringes of the human mind. The play begins with an utterly theatrical situation: several complete strangers awake in a room with no doors or windows and set to figuring out how and why they've ended up in such a predicament. What results is an intellectual challenge with twists aplenty for both the characters and the reader.

Discovering border situations

Forming a group of their own are Estonian plays based on a socially sensitive topic or one that has been swept under the rug.

Liis Sein's play *From Where the Wind Blows* turns the spotlight to blind musicians who are fired from an orchestra and must find a new central point for their lives. The same author's play ***Honey, I'm Happy*** shows what happens when a

woman who has been married for decades finally confesses to her husband that she is a lesbian. **Kiti Põld's *Bury Me Nicely*** is a great example of how a simple conversation about how someone would like to be buried can escalate into a dispute over the spouses' relationship and their future.

Copper* by Johan Elm**, a recent graduate of the Estonian Academy of Music and Theater's Drama School, hands the mic to creators. A colorful group of people gather at a seasoned painter's studio and, as usual with such social gatherings, inevitably arrive at the question: where is the line between art and life? What rights and responsibilities do creators have for their work? **Maimu Berg's *Atelier tells of a similar meeting of cultural individuals, but in a confessional manner. She focuses on the legendary Soviet-era gatherings at the atelier of the famous Estonian psychologist and writer Vaino Vahing, which she personally attended as his wife. Berg describes the more hidden side of such a lifestyle – its very lowly and human aspect. Elm and Berg's respective works form a kind of unintentional whole and act as commentaries or dialogues with each other when read.

Ott Kilusk's *Axework*, which is written in the Seto language and conjures an entire universe, was the winning entry of the 2017 competition. The crime drama unfolds in a small South Estonian village in the 1990s, weaving together the living and the dead along with humor and horror. The result is a well-tangled web that poses a proper challenge for all who attempt to unravel it (and Godspeed to the translators who take on the task – the play is certainly worth translating!).



Although this brief article cannot address all the winning entries, it is clear that Estonian playwrights repeatedly take us by surprise with fascinating topics and observations while not overlooking the oft-lacking element of humor (here, it's worth mentioning **Katrin Ruus' *Half-uncle, i.e. Journey into the Blue***). Naturally, one can always question the juries' decisions and the adequacy of the generalizations their selections allow us to make, but for theater fans, these competitions are praiseworthy springs of new material and always produce intriguing works to be read.

The drama mentioned here is of high technical caliber and the stories are truly enjoyable even without a stage. Still, I hope they will all one day be put on for audiences – if not in Estonia, then elsewhere abroad. The myth that Estonia is a land of theater wonder goes hand in hand with another: that local theater is inward-looking, self-absorbed,

and disregards the rest of the world. I disagree. Many of the plays mentioned here are universal in nature and may be retold in several different cultures.¹ And to all those who doubt whether plays are worth reading in the first place, I say: give it a try. I assure you the appreciation will thrive.

MIHKEL SEEDER (b. 1988) is a playwright. He also works as a dramaturge at VAT Theater and an instructor at the creative writing school Drakadeemia.

¹ For information on Estonian plays and their translations, contact the Estonian Theater Agency's dramaturge Heidi Aadma (heidi@teater.ee). The Estonian Theater Agency's web page at www.teater.ee also contains English-language information on Estonian playwrights and drama.

Most important of all is the person

An interview with Vahur Afanasjev

by Holger Kaints

Vahur Afanasjev is a multifaceted man who has written poetry as well as prose, produced films, performed music, and dabbled in many other creative arts. Time and again, these activities have landed him in Estonia's spotlight. Yet when his novel *Serafima and Bogdan* was published last year, it became resoundingly clear that Afanasjev is a writer above all.

The novel first won the Estonian Writers' Union's Novel Competition and then, this spring, received the most esteemed local literary prize: the Cultural Endowment of Estonia's Award for Prose. *Serafima and Bogdan* is a pan-generational story about the lives of Russian Orthodox Old Believers inhabiting the western shore of Lake Peipus. It endeavors to determine the driving forces behind revenge and violence, as well as to comprehend what man's role is here on earth.

You have quite a long literary path behind you and received recognition for your writing long before *Serafima and Bogdan*. Perhaps you could talk, first of all, about your background and your writing: what points in your career seem most important to you, personally?

My father was a mathematician, but he loved to read, and our walls were filled with shelves upon shelves of books. My maternal grandmother, who would come to look after me, read me fantastic works such as Selma Lagerlöf's *The Wonderful Adventures of Nils*. I remember being struck by the idea to start writing books even before I really knew how to read or write. My first book was going to be about aliens and eggs. I haven't written it yet. My grandmother, by the way, wrote many of her own lyrics to songs, such as "*Seal kus rukviväli*" ("On the Banks of the Wabash, Far Away") and "*Kaugel, kaugel, kus on minu kodu*" ("Red River Valley"). The lyrics were akin to popular Estonian-language translations, or "fan lyrics", as we would say nowadays.

I wrote my first poems as a teenager, inspired by the Estonian band Vennaskond,



ONCE UPON A TIME IN PERU · ARCHIVE PHOTO

led by Tõnu Trubetsky: an anarchist and a romantic poet. Using poems as lyrics is common practice in Estonia; much more common than in the West. Although I've mostly written free-verse poetry in my adult years, I still always hear it rhythmically in my head, like it's part of music. Actually, music is what feeds my prose, giving it a shade of emotion. Music is physical; is pure emotion; is the electricity of a text machine.

My poems were first published in the Estonian literary journal *Vikerkaar* in 1998, twenty years ago – it amazes me that my life already has that kind of a dimension.

I joined the *Noorte Autorite Koondis* [NAK, Young Authors' Society], which was simultaneously a group and a club for creative persons. There, I met the best daughters and sons of Estonian literature. It's important for one to find allies. We didn't discuss each other's writing, didn't hold creative-writing seminars or involve ourselves in any other crap like that, but rather talked to one another; partied, and learned how to perform so we would be heard.

In 2000, I used a student loan to print my poetry collection *Kandiline maailm* (Square World). I suppose I hoped I'd

become famous right away. Estonia is tiny and some people have gotten famous like that – newspapers and literary magazines would publish a review or mention them. It'd be a big thing in a big country. And then came years of constant work, which the modest recognition – given by a tight circle – encouraged me to continue. This led to receiving the Cultural Endowment of Estonia's Award for Poetry and wider fame for my 2015 collection *Tünsamäe tigu* (The Snail of South Estonia).

There's this idea in a Janusz Glowacki play: in order to change an intellectual's mind, it's enough to ask him "Are you sure?" I suppose I'm not an intellectual in that sense, because I kept writing – poetry collections, short stories, and shorter novels. Throughout that time, I worked in the fields of journalism, advertising, and public administration. I tried out the stock markets; I was in a casting agency and a couple of start-ups. I lived in Brussels for five years working in an EU institution. Well, Kurt Vonnegut sold cars, and they say he was the first importer of SAAB to the US.

***Serafima and Bogdan* has entranced many readers through its field of focus. You deliver a miniscule nation in all its glory to Estonian literature. One that locals all know exists, but which has rarely been represented in Estonian literature, and even then only in the form of secondary or background characters. The Russian Old Believers, or as Estonians call them the "Peipus Russians", have lived on the western shore of Lake Peipus for centuries. Residing here, they have formed their own identity; one so strong that they have their own**

word for the Russians who moved to Estonia's territory later: *rusmannny* (I even found that out from your novel). The life and times of these Old Believers, primarily during the period 1944–1987, comes to life through your pen in this book. Could you characterize the situation of these people in Estonia more generally? What could a reader know about the Lake Peipus Old Believers prior to opening up *Serafima and Bogdan*?

The Orthodox Russian Old Believers living along Lake Peipus are an archaic, culturally Russian minority that formed in the 17th century with the beginning of the centralization of the Russian state and Church. Some decided to remain true to the old customs, fleeing to the periphery of the tsardom and to neighboring countries; some even to America. These religious refugees entering Estonia, settled somewhat sparsely along Lake Peipus, as a result there were no great clashes with the Estonian-speaking natives. Although the population was initially extremely religious, they were not an expansive majority. I can't imagine Old Believer missionaries going door-to-door or turning Europe into their own "caliphate".

The Soviet era exterminated Old Believers' traditions from their everyday life, but a thrilling *genius loci* still exists: a breath of old Russia from the time before Peter the Great, perhaps even of Andrei Rublev. Estonia is situated at the border of the European Union, even at the border between East and West. Eras, in addition to cultures, mingle along the coast of Lake Peipus, but one doesn't need to know that beforehand and can simply garner the knowledge from the book in peace.

Scattered along Lake Peipus' shoreline is a population with truly diverse backgrounds: far from all of them are Old Believers, and just like with Protestants, there are several different kinds. Our neighbors were Pomors who were much milder than the Fedoseyevians in terms of religion: the latter don't recognize marriage, for example. If a Fedoseyevian Old Believer enters an earthly marital union, then the person is not excommunicated, but the congregation determines a symbolic punishment for the couple. As an interesting parallel, in America, a land of immigrants, the scale of Protestantism is much more mottled: you have Seventh-Day Adventists, Methodists, Presbyterians, Calvinists, ordinary Protestants, and Anabaptists. The attempts to convert Old Believers would be a topic for a novel of its own. In addition to the Moscow and Constantinople patriarchates, all kinds of brotherhoods and Pentecostals all the way up to Jehovah's Witnesses have given it a try (quite unsuccessfully, I might add). Only the Communists pulled off their conversion, and so much so that they left only a brush-choked clearing in place of a religion.

Now, I'd like to touch on the topic of you and the Old Believers. I understand that despite your Russian last name, you yourself have no ancestral ties to the Old Believers. How did the topic come into your life and how much additional material about the Old Believers did you have to look up when writing the book?

My parents bought a cabin in an Old Believer village in the early 1980s. I spent summers there, playing with the local kids and listening to what the adults talked about. All our neighbors had icon corners, grew onions,

drank tea from saucers, and their Russian was different from the Russian taught at school; the adult women kept their hair covered. I suppose it was only once I was living in Brussels that I realized what a unique environment I was acquainted with.

To write my novel, I read books about the Old Believers and the people living along Lake Peipus. There weren't a whole lot of them, but I also combed carefully through the internet. There's an astounding wealth of information written – both in Estonian and in Russian – about their village celebrations, the Red Terror, the founding of the kolkhoz farm system, Stalin's death, shop goods, the healthcare system, their dress, their methods for fishing, and even how they went swimming. Luckily, I can read Russian, so there were exponentially more sources than I'd have found about the era and the Soviet empire with only the Estonian or English languages at my disposal. The research helped me organize my knowledge, but I couldn't have written a book like this without direct experience. Even though it's thick, I recorded far from everything.

One of the most important parts of the Old-Believer identity is religiosity. Consequently, great attention is dealt to the characters' religious experiences and practices. It is testament to religion's importance in your book that you've added a snippet from scripture to every chapter. It's not hard to pick out the references you made to sacred texts when titling the novel's sections: "The Book of Weddings", "The Book of Survival", "The Book of Growth", etc. What's more, the fact that any type of

religion at all was officially ostracized and condemned during the Soviet era leaves its stamp on the whole sphere. How difficult was it for you to revive that atmosphere interlaced with religion? During the 1980s, back when you were spending time at your parents' summer cabin in a village on the shore of Lake Peipus, how perceivable was the nearby Old Believers' relationship to religion?

The primary generation of the late 1920s and early 1930s at the center of the plot of *Serafima and Bogdan* was alive and well back then. They made the sign of the cross, lit candles in front of icons in the corner of their houses, and knew the religious holidays. As a child, I didn't give any thought to the religious background, of course. And they behaved oddly. For instance, the neighbors earned a sizeable supplement to their kolkhoz salaries by selling cucumbers and onions, but didn't build a bigger house or significantly improve their living conditions with it. They carried water in from the well in a pail, an outhouse was back by the shed, and a waste bucket reeked in the corner, but at the same time, a state of absolute cleanliness governed indoors. Little houses, modest living conditions – their attitude wasn't to take and demand more of life; bigger, more colorful. If God delivered, then he delivered.

Socialism had partially elbowed its way in in place of God. People also weren't responsible, nor were they permitted responsibility for their own lives. Up until World War II, religion had more or less kept the Old Believer population's hedonism in check. When the kolkhoz system was put in place, people started drinking and behaved more

carelessly with nature and animals. The younger the person, the worse he behaved. Even as a child, the difference was obvious to me.

In my opinion, socialism was more devastating to the Old Believers along Lake Peipus than it was to inland Estonians, particularly because of the lack of responsibility they were accustomed to. Protestant or unreligious Estonians were used to getting by on their own; the collapse of the socialist system didn't affect them as severely. The shore of Lake Peipus, on the other hand, was suddenly deprived of both God and the state's suckling teat. Society and the economy don't work effectively when populations are kept like sheep. The destruction of Socialism was a natural process across the entire Soviet Union.

Rebirth, resurrection, nirvana – religion offers many opportunities to believe there's something greater, something more beautiful, something purer than man. That something lies beyond earthly life and human intelligence, but at the same time is something towards which one can advance and, perhaps, even reach if he tries hard enough. Still, the person is most important of all. Me, my loved ones, the place I live in, my nation, and people all around the world with similar interests or fates. According to Buddhism, everything is emptiness. Still, even if I'm an illusion or a program on a hard drive like in a Stanislaw Lem novella, I *still* perceive my existence. Intensely. With every cell of my being. There's no sign of reincarnation or nonexistence in the perceivable world. I have one life and one death. It's a heavy thought, but it makes it that much clearer how much you must care for yourself and others.



I myself have also written a few works of historical fiction about Estonia's hard times in the mid-20th century and later. My experience tells me there's a big difference between writing about your own lifetime (even a small child can vividly remember many details that are true to the era) and writing about years that preceded your date of birth. Then, you've got to do a lot of research so as not to make stupid mistakes that would be embarrassing later. You're 20 years younger than me and the years you write about in *Serafima and Bogdan* are more distant for you than they are me. I'd estimate over 80% of the work is set in times when you yourself didn't exist yet. What did you do to guarantee sufficient veracity?

People perceive their era quite differently depending on their age, culture, gender, and much else, so there isn't a single, correct picture of any particular time, anyway. I like details and I checked them very carefully. When the leisure boat *Lermontov* sails down the river, it's a confirmed fact from the river-harbor archive. People who were alive during those times have praised the book's authenticity and are amazed at how it really is possible to convincingly recreate the atmosphere of a fishing harbor or a construction store in the 1970s. It delights me, no matter that a convincing atmosphere can simply mean a well-crafted fantasy.

One of my impetuses for writing *Serafima and Bogdan* was Aleksey Tolstoy's *Peter the First*: an epic novel based on archive



AT THE KOLKJA ORTHODOX CEMETERY · PHOTO BY PIJA RUBER

materials that is brought vividly to life through the talented use of artefacts. For example, the young Peter the Great offers his first wife smoked chicken on their wedding night, and there are rotting furs in a secret chamber – a grand treasure of earlier generations. Incidentally, there's a fair amount of details about Old Believers in *Peter the First*. They were no longer the keepers of old traditions in Peter the Great's time, for the most part, but rather extremist religious sects – individuals who were prepared to burn themselves alive in their churches, and who sometimes did.

Revenge is a pervasive theme throughout *Serafima and Bogdan*. A terrible murder takes place at the beginning

of the novel and the protagonists plot their revenge as a consequence. You convincingly show how merely the thought and planning of an act of revenge can be ruinous for those involved; its execution is, in any case, a double-edged sword. Therefore, I'll ask: did you immediately intend to write about revenge? I wouldn't want to believe it came from the environment: as pious as they were, Old Believers obviously shouldn't stand out for a lust for vengeance. I'd assume they're more forgiving of others.

It actually all started with the theme of revenge. I was looking for material for a documentary-film script about folk-metal

bands and came across an old story from the Nordic Völsunga saga that gave me goosebumps. I'd wanted to write about the Old Believers and Lake Peipus for a while, and I somehow came up with the idea to put the two things together. Revenge over the course of generations: how, why? The saga lacks psychological motivation and character development; there's only action.

The Old Testament begins with God taking vengeance on humankind. Adam and Eve come to know the difference between good and bad, and thus become godlike. What does God do? He doesn't take revenge on them alone, but declares all future generations as bearers of their guilt; sinners. Jesus seemingly redeems mankind in the New Testament, but just read the letters of the apostles: God's vengeance still hangs above us.

Moving from theory into practice, there were several grim events that transpired in our village. One old guy's father had been in a Red destruction battalion and the Omakaitse (Estonian Home Guard) executed his father. Another old guy had served in the German police force. Decades later, they got into a scuffle once when they were drunk. There were several hundred people living in the village and the houses were lined up right next to one another, so conflicts sparked both out of practical reasons and because of boredom and stupidity.

Revenge was usually limited to talking behind someone's back, but some also tried witchcraft: burying rags in someone's garden and casting a spell over them, for instance. Livestock and poultry would be injured in the worst case, or were at

least frightened. Country folk who generally live in harmony with nature can turn astoundingly cruel and careless at any given moment. One neighbor heard that sleeping in a dog skin helps against radiculitis, so he killed his dog. A big yellow one. Whether the skin helped, I can't say.

In a Russian-style village where the houses are pressed close to one another, neighbors come into contact more often than in a big apartment building, whether simply for the fact that much of the chores are done outside in sight of the neighbors. Some chores are done together, advice is asked or offered without one even asking – that's how stories happen. Many of them are genial, others are exceptionally dark, but the whole carnival is thrilling. The village is a carnal phenomenon: one in the spirit of Hieronymus Bosch or Flemish and Dutch carnivals. Beauty and ugliness are relative notions; naturalness triumphs in the village life that is recorded in *Serafima and Bogdan*. It's a lost authenticity that my friends living in the West yearn for so dearly and go seeking from other continents.

If I may ask, then what are you working on right now and when can readers hope to enjoy a new book from you?

Serafima and Bogdan has turned out to be more colossal than I could have ever hoped. Holding a spot in the top-ten Estonian book sales for almost a year now? If it's an illusion, then it's an illusion I want to inhabit. Translators and foreign publishers have surfaced, so even if I wanted to focus solely on new things, it'd be impossible.

I always have several ideas in progress at once, but, it goes without saying, unfinished

ideas aren't worth a thing. I finished a few plays this year that I wrote as practice and with a nod to Witkiewicz, Chekhov, and Urmas Vadi, who's recently made a name for himself on Estonian stages. I intended to finish a shorter, somewhat dreamlike novel in spring, but I hit a snag. I came up with a new idea instead: a story about a global catastrophe and a character akin to Elon Musk who is also involved in electric cars, space tourism, and the future of humankind. I probe why technology and intellectual progress are always accompanied by a belief in downfall: the smoother it goes, the less hope there is. It's not going to be a very thick book. I also have an idea for a thicker novel; I'm currently gathering materials, fostering the feeling, and shaping the plots and the characters. I used to think planning works in advance was something foolish, but now, I've discovered the allure of designing. Poetry is the only work where it's worth waiting for inspiration: everything else should be dragged ahead with a yoke if you need to, otherwise you'll just keep sitting on the ideas and waiting for them to hatch.

HOLGER KAINITS (b. 1957) is an Estonian author who spent the greater part of his earlier years in bookselling. He has penned novels, short prose, and book reviews. His works include the short-story collection *Päev, mil Stalin suri* (The Day When Stalin Died, 2015), *Uinuv maa* (Drowsy Land, 2016), which depicts Estonia in the years 1938–1946, and his latest work, *Mälestusi raamatutest* (Memories About Books, 2017).

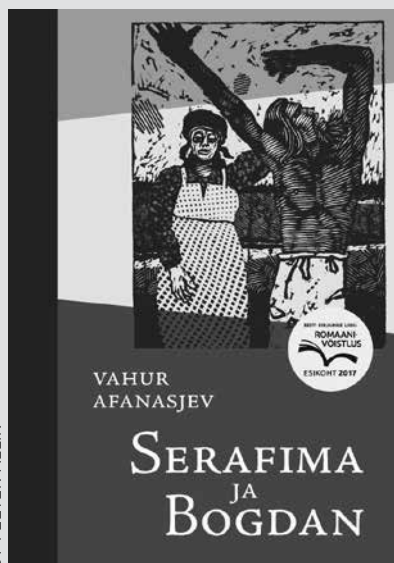




Serafima and Bogdan

by Vahur Afanasjev · Excerpt translated by Adam Cullen

SERAFIMA AND BOGDAN BY VAHUR AFANASJEV · ILLUSTRATIONS BY PEETER ALLIK



Excerpt from the chapter “Deportation”

The widow Glafira’s sauna has been heated. Sitting in the cramped dressing room, the mugginess of an intense steam session still suspended in the air, are Edison Vassilyevich and “Chicken Uncle” Sergei: justifying his nickname, he has corralled a couple of hens into the room for warmth and “so that we might be in the company of ladies”, as he quips. He scatters some feed for the chickens to peck at—hanging from the wall is a vegetable basket, into which fistfuls of grain have been tossed along with soft, sprouting potatoes to be boiled up for pig fodder. There’s no avoiding the vodka bottle here, either. Sergei also managed to save half a small barrel of pickles until springtime, and even brought a saucer of honey along for dipping.

“Oh, come and sit inside, you old men,” Glafira coaxed, but they stayed in the sauna building after steaming, all the same. Both seemingly needed to get something off his chest. Sergei begins.

“The thing is... Well, to me, it’s all familiar, of course. Not as if before the war, we...”

"We know," Edison affirms.

"Well, there you go. Don't be offended, but those lists—didn't they show you the lists, then?"

Edison is silent.

"Right. They took young 'uns this time, an awful lot of them. I'm not saying how or what, you understand—what can we really do about it? But nevertheless—young 'uns. Everyone was getting by just fine here, you could've put any one of us on the trains. Better if they had: go ahead and take away the old ones, God's speed to you; but they took the young 'uns! With children! I, you know—I'm a wifeless vagabond. Could've sent me away along with old Glafira here. She's hanging onto life by a thread already, may the Lord have mercy on her!"

"The Lord?!" Edison sputters lividly. "What 'Lord' are you talking about?! The Lord God! If God truly existed, then I'd kick Him right where it counts! I'd take Him to court; I'd annihilate Him! Are these God's works? Is this how He loves His children?"

Each of Edison's words is progressively louder. Sergei shakes his head and scratches his beard agitatedly. "Don't you go... That's not necessary."

"But..."

Sergei interrupts him. "You forget that God and the Devil come from the same family."

"Even worse!" Edison exclaims, raising the blue shot glass to his lips and emptying it without waiting for his companion.

"There is, I'm saying, a passage in the Book of Isaiah that goes: 'I form the light, and create darkness: I make peace, and create evil: I the Lord do all these things.'¹ And then it goes on to say: 'Woe unto him that striveth with his Maker! Let the potsherd strive with the potsherd of the earth. Shall the clay say to him that fashioneth it, What makest thou? or thy work, He hath no hands?'"² For the Lord works in mysterious ways. Maybe the Devil doesn't exist and there's only God Himself with His will and all He's capable of. Are we then capable of being human? Forgive me for having brought up the lists. It's an outright folly, an impossibility—as if you could make such things lesser towards the greater. No, my dear man: God has made it such that this is how people behave. We've gotten along nicely though, too; amiably. I believe those days will return because, in truth, God loves man. Perhaps He Himself, the Almighty, isn't entirely satisfied with the way he shaped the clay, either? Still, we don't want another flood now, do we? That's what happened: Moses lay forty days and forty nights before God so He would not destroy us."

Sergei drains his glass dry and refills both.

"Well, you're not called *Father* Sergei for nothing. Where do you derive the strength to talk like that?" Edison asks with a sigh. "I don't actually understand everything you said, but I feel better. I realize that when we don't always do everything as justly as we should, it's... handicraft. That's the way it's done."

Sergei nods. "But how are you able to come

1 Isaiah 45:7 (King James Bible)

2 Isaiah 45:9 (King James Bible)

to terms with it yourself? To make peace? The Germans *did* burn down your whole village.”

“They did,” Sergei replied. “And not only they.”

He goes to the door, cracks it open, and pokes his head outside: there’s no one to be seen in the moonlight; only the snow drifts which rolled across the landscape in swells during the day and acquired brittle shells again at night. The windows of the little house across the yard are also dark—Glafira had snuffed out the petroleum lamp and snuggled into bed.

“Alright, let’s drink together,” Sergei says. He raises his glass, then sits down on the bench and continues. “So, where did I leave off? I can’t say how I come to terms with it. Perhaps I don’t. No one should entirely. And I didn’t phrase anything particularly well—I spoke abstrusely, because I myself haven’t figured it all out. There you have it. I didn’t make it to Berlin, you know; I’ve told you that. The last place I lived was Yushkino—that’s across the lake from here and then a little further, nestled among the marshes. My relatives were done in back in ’19, during the civil war, with pitchforks. They left my grandmother and me alive. I can’t even remember my parents, you understand?! We lived in a whole different place then, down in the south, but we left: first to Ostrov, then to Pskov—the monastery there was still operating somehow.

“Grandmother wanted me to grow up to be a priest. All my relatives had been clergy: my paternal grandfather was a priest, as was his father. *Vot*, and so it was: Grandmother raised me, and I visited

the priests in secret to study. They even wanted to send me to monastic school—good thing they didn’t. That was back during the NEP³. But then came the 30s and anyone at the monastery who didn’t disperse was declared an enemy of the people. That’s the way things were.”

They refill their glasses and drink again.

“Even so, I can’t figure out how you’re capable of making amends with your god,” Edison remarks. “I come from the village of Staraya Russa. My parents were progressive, hence my first name. My father was a mud hauler—there were mud baths there. Mother did the procedures. When I was serving my conscription, my parents disappeared—just like that. No one told me; I had to hear about it through acquaintances. The apartment was sealed shut and then, new residents moved in. I’ll never make peace with it. It’s understandable: there exist times like that where society must change. Change can never take place peacefully, we do realize that, but I’m a nobody—I’m not capable of thinking big like maybe *he* does there with his big moustache. And it’s been ages since I could think the way your god does: loving people and putting them to the test; dealing out light and darkness. No, if it’s up to them, then I won’t forgive either one: neither Stalin nor God.”

“But what about Hitler—would you forgive him?”

3 *The New Economic Policy, a state-controlled but more market-oriented economic policy proposed by Lenin to help the Soviet Union recover after World War II.*

Edison falls silent for a few moments and turns red in the face. “What do you mean?! Of course I wouldn’t—him the very least! Hitler’s an enemy of our people. The fascists wanted to destroy us. We destroyed them, and it’s as simple as that. I myself have killed fascists by my own hands. And I lobbed a grenade into a trench, but the blood and guts there, the gurgling, fuck, a fascist, but I don’t feel bad. Just saying that with them, it’s good: they say, hey, we’re going to come and kill you, and you fight back, you kill them; they don’t come and say they love you.”

The chickens, which have been scratching in the dirt at their feet throughout the whole conversation, start clucking nervously. Sergei lifts a finger to his lips and makes a quelling gesture, but not to the fowl.

“Oh God, God, Edison Vassilyevich—best you hold your tongue! True, hardly anyone is likely to hear us here, but be quiet all the same. It’s better that I not hear you and you not hear yourself, either. Or me, likewise. Agreed?”

“Agreed,” Edison sighs heavily. “There’s still vodka left. Let’s drink, and then we should go take a look at the sauna: there could still be warmth in the stones. We’ll throw some water on them and then, straight to the snow bank. There’s a spot I scouted out here beforehand where you can jump in without worrying about landing in chicken shit or anything.”



EXHIBITION OF THE ILLUSTRATIONS IN SERAFIMA AND BOGDAN AT VORONYA GALLERY, VARNJA VILLAGE (ARTIST PEETER ALLIK) · PHOTO BY PIIA RUBER

The Dodo's decision

by Maarja Kangro

"Everybody has won and all must have prizes."

Those are the Dodo's words in Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, and both James F. English¹ and Joel Best use them as an epigraph in their respective books. In English's work, the handsome line is the epigraph for his first chapter "Prize Frenzy"; in Best's, it is used for the whole book. The Dodo's verdict (which probably doesn't even need to be explained) is meant to illustrate the burgeoning of awards in today's world.

Understandably, the number of awards isn't the only thing that has swelled over the last fifty years. The global population and the economy have exploded (most of all the "unweighted" economy that includes the cultural industry), and the annual number of books published has increased along with people's expenses on literature. Even so, the number of awards has increased with a sharper curve than anything else.

¹ James F. English's book *The Economy of Prestige. Prizes, Awards, and the Circulation of Cultural Value* (2005) and Joel Best's book *Everyone's a Winner. Life in Our Congratulatory Culture* (2011).



THE DODO GIVES ALICE HER OWN THIMBLE AS A PRIZE. ILLUSTRATION BY JOHN TENNIEL IN THE FIRST EDITION OF LEWIS CARROLL'S BOOK *ALICE IN WONDERLAND* (1865) · WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

One particular curiosity that both English and, later, Best highlight is the fact that in the film world, there are twice as many awards as the number of full-length feature films produced each year. Anyone capable of producing something that doesn't force the viewer to flee the auditorium in embarrassment can hope that somewhere there is a film festival where the film will be awarded, such as with a thematic, regional, or debut prize. Writers who have already received

an award tend to believe there probably aren't any unawarded writers left in the world, naturally forgetting their colleagues to whom the Dodo's paradisiacal decision has not yet extended. Yet, even though the explosion of awards has not reached everyone, the numbers are still impressive.

English provides an overview of the growth of British literary awards: before World War II, there were hardly a dozen considerable awards, which came out to two or three per new book published. In 1981, there were already over 50 awards; by 1988, there were over 90; and by 2000, according to a modest estimation, there were at least 180 – though professionals in the book industry claim there were at least 400. The latter experts' estimation was probably also highly modest or took into account only the larger awards, considering the population of the United Kingdom and how many literary awards there are per 100,000 residents of Estonia (the reader will find that data in just a moment). Leaving out the local and small-scale literary awards, there were over 1,100 in the United States by the turn of the century, which similarly seems like a very narrow count.

Best uses the growth of thriller awards as an example. In 1946, the "Edgar" genre award (named after Edgar Allan Poe) was issued for the first time; by the year 1980, there were already 25 crime awards, and by 2005, there were 99.

In 2014, the newspaper *Main-Post* claimed Germany had nearly 1,000 literary awards. That very same year, the international 50,000-euro Siegfried Lenz Preis was added to the mix. The renowned critic Marcel Reich-Ranicki is said to have complained

about the inflation of literary recognitions already in 1962, even though there were only 120 such awards in Germany at the time.

Now that there are ten times as many awards, the Germans themselves are convinced there aren't as many in any other European country. Several of them are prestigious and well-known: the Büchner Preis, the Kleist Preis, the Heine Preis, the Goethe Preis. The Germans' international ambition in issuing these awards stands out in particular: they also issue a plethora of them to authors who do not write in German. Since 2017, they have also had the German Self-Publishing Prize (*Deutscher Selfpublishing-Preis*), although they are not alone in the field: in early 2017, Amazon also announced a £20,000 self-publishing award. I asked the poet Gian Mario Villalta about Italian awards: he reckoned they also have somewhere in the vicinity of one thousand literary awards, and that maybe even three awards are issued every day. His colleague Valerio Magrelli acknowledged this is probably the case, though he had the impression that, ever since he started writing, the awards of any importance have stayed the same: Strega, Campiello, Viareggio, Mondello. It's difficult for new awards to achieve the same level of prestige; furthermore, they are primarily local.

It seems like the field of awards won't be contracting any time soon. In the spring of 2018, the Estonian Writers' Union Siuru Fund issued yet another new award: a grant for a young artist whose writing is "borne of the Siuru spirit", whatever that's supposed to mean. (Monetary awards are occasionally also called grants with the intention of emphasizing the recipients' future hopes; naturally, not just any grant is an award).

An award may also kick the bucket from time to time, which is a part of life. Two years ago, an article in *The Guardian* complained about the demise of several awards: one of the departed was the Hatchet Job of the Year, which recognized the most successful mean literary reviewer. The Germans issued their Chamisso Award for the last time in 2017, which was given to non-German authors of German-language books. The award had been criticized for promoting “Uncle Tom literature”, then watered down as foreign-laborer literature, though the fund justified its ultimate decision by saying the award had served its purpose. At the Transpoesie European poetry festival, the Belgian writer Peter Verhelst told me his country’s literary-award landscape has shrunk noticeably, and that several had withered away over the last few years. We drank wine at the BOZAR fine arts center in Brussels and were nearly running late to perform for a European audience; that was in October 2017. “It’s interesting you ask,” said Verhelst, who was proud his career wasn’t dependent upon grants.

Nevertheless, I don’t believe Belgium’s situation, as it appears to the poet right now, could be used to declare an overall shrinking trend. If I had to bet on either the expansion or contraction of awards around the globe, I wouldn’t doubt for a second.

More than murders

As you can see, there is, presently, a tremendous annual number of literary awardees in Estonia: as many as 75 during an especially bumper year, with a total of 258 nominees.

According to Statistics Estonia, Estonia had a population of 1,315,635 on January 1,

2017. If we assume there were indeed 258 nominees for literary prizes, we get 19.6 per 100,000 residents annually. If we reduce the number to a more modest figure and stay at 200 nominees, then the number comes out to a round 15 per 100,000 persons. Both are quite formidable figures.

Anyone wishing to compliment Estonia could mention in conversation that we have significantly fewer traffic deaths per 100,000 residents than we do literary-award nominees: over the period 2013–2016, for example, the average number of traffic deaths was 75 per year, which makes 5.7 per 100,000. By my calculation, there are almost the same number of laureates as there are road-accident victims every year, and if you add in the wide range of literary competitions and their second- and third places, there are even more. Of course, anyone can die in a car crash, but only someone who writes and is published (and that in a specific genre) can compete for a literary award. Still, it’s fun to imagine it as a game: you shake a big bag containing the names of Estonian residents marked with yearly events, pick one out, and it’s more probable you’ll randomly select someone who has been nominated for a literary award than someone awaiting a cruel fate on the highway.

There are also fewer intentional deaths annually in Estonia than nominees for literary awards; or, in fact, even fewer than the number of literary awards themselves. The number of police-registered first-degree murders declined sharply for at least a while: in 2012, for example, there were 63 murders, and only 52 in 2013. Let’s give the big bag of the population’s annual events a shake: leaving aside all other factors, it’s



MAARJA KANGRO · PHOTO BY PIIA RUBER

more likely a literary-award laureate will be picked than a murder victim.

On the other hand, there were 229 diagnosed cases of HIV in Estonia in 2016, which makes 17.4 per 100,000 residents and close to the same number of literary-award nominees. Unfortunately, we also tend to have a similar number of suicides: 18.9 per 100,000 residents according to 2015 World Health Organization data.

Furthermore, we have several dozen more inmates than literary-award nominees: a few years ago (in 2014), there were 238 per 100,000 residents. It's even rarer to be a recognized writer than it is to be a convicted criminal. Things could be opposite in a perfect society.

More than wolves

How many writers are there in Estonia right now? Or how many Estonian writers are there? To determine this, one should firstly ask who the Estonian writer is in terms of either nationality or ethnicity, and the definition isn't at all so simple. Is a writer someone who regards themselves as a writer? Or is a writer someone whom is outwardly labelled a writer, such as in a media channel? Say, for instance, "XY, a writer, shares her opinion about the draft domestic partnership law." Who must be the one to say you're a writer for you to *be* one? Is it your colleagues, other writers, first of all?

It's obvious that the writer should have written and published something, but how much is necessary to be a writer and not simply the author of a couple specific pieces? How complicated, even irksome! The finance-based classification, i.e. "a

writer is someone who makes a living off of writing", is long since defunct in Estonia. Assuming, in the interests of simplicity, that a writer is someone who creates and publishes literature, and leaving aside the issues surrounding the definition of literature, let's see how many such people reside in Estonia currently.

We will begin from the institutional level. As of September 1, 2017, the ever-growing Estonian Writers' Union had 312 members, 176 of whom had published works of literature over the last five years, i.e. in the period 2012–2016 (thus, 56.4% of members were active literary authors at the given moment). These are individuals whose status as authors can no longer be judged institutionally. However, they are undoubtedly not the only authors in Estonia. The number of writers who had published literary works over the last five years was nearly three times as great; specifically, in the vicinity of 500. Consequently, there are certainly more writers living on Estonian territory than there are wolves, which numbered around 200 according to the latest estimate. At the same time, Estonia's writers might even be equal in number to bears: about 700 in the year 2017. In the fall of that same year, a whopping 74 permits were issued to hunt and kill wolves in Estonia.

In his 2009 review of poetry for the Estonian literary journal *Looming*, Märt Väljataga wrote that when he compiled a similar overview for the same journal in 1987 with the author Hasso Krull, they had only 11 books of poetry to address; in 2009, however, there were 94 first-edition collections. As dramatic an increase as that was, in 2016 alone, there were 14 books of poetry

published by authors who had already received or previously been nominated for a poetry award in their lifetime. That same year, more than 30 previously-awarded authors published works of prose.

Of course, there are many more awarded and active writers in Estonia than the 14 + 30 equation. If we add up the poets who are currently active (i.e. have published books recently) and have ever received an award, the total is somewhere near 45.

Additionally, if you include the active poets who have at least been nominated for awards, then we get well over fifty recognized poets – and here, I am only considering awards designated for poetry by adults.

I was able to tally already close to 70 active prose writers who have received at least one literary award (in addition to a horde of nominees). Some of the names of successful poets and prose writers overlap, but the plateau is broad and expansive overall: somewhere around 130 people (without counting young laureates without books). Thus, Estonia has its own basis point of recognized literary authors who write for adults: one ten-thousandth of the population. Perhaps one ten-thousandth doesn't seem like all that great a share, but if we consider a similar ratio in a country such as the US, then there would be well over 30,000 awarded or nominated literary writers in that country. Such individuals would number 6,000 in Italy and 8,000 in Germany. One might doubt there are even enough tiny local awards or nominations to go around for so many writers in those countries, but who knows.

The fact that recognized authors form an entire basis point of the population would sit

wonderfully with the Dodo. In the interests of fairness, however, I must confirm that those who feel Estonian literary awards are scant or that the craved podium is unjustly inaccessible are not uncommon, and it always happens that some fine work or author is left empty-handed at awards ceremonies. Additionally, one must take into account that not all awards are alike: their level of prestige differs. The more alleged experts on a jury (even when particular experts seem wrong), the more tantalizing the award. An award from a parish leader is nice, but let's be honest. And we shouldn't forget that recognition requires constant renewal: a win secured a long time ago may not feed a writer's peace of mind anymore. Depending on the individual's level of sensitivity, they might perceive themselves as nudged out of the picture if no new awards or nominations have been delivered, even over a period of three or four years. While one author may cocoon him- or herself in layers of recognition, the certificates remain fortuitous delights to others.

The above is an excerpt from Maarja Kangro's new book "Our Prizes" (2018). An excerpt was first published in the Estonian cultural weekly Sirp on March 16, 2018.

MAARJA KANGRO is an Estonian poet, writer, librettist and translator whose works have been translated into more than 20 languages. Her sharp and sensitive documentary novel *The Glass Child* was published in 2016, and has gained local and international attention since. She has also written several libretti for Estonian composers and has translated from Italian, English, German, and other languages.

It's worth seeing what's good

An interview with Kadri Hinrikus

by Kristi Helme

Kadri Hinrikus, an Estonian children's literature author, first became known to most of the local population as a TV news anchor. Her hobby of writing children's books naturally couldn't stay secret for long. Hinrikus' first book *Miia and Friida* was published in 2008 to immediate warm reception. Her ninth book *Catherine and the Peas* (2017) was nominated for the Cultural Endowment of Estonia's Award for Children's Literature and received the Tartu City Library's Children's Literature Award.

All signs pointed to the time being right for Hinrikus to close the chapter of her television work and dedicate more time and space to writing.

Sitting at a café in downtown Tallinn, it's plain to see that Hinrikus is happy and content: as she herself remarks, every positive word and recognition gives her joy. "An award does give you good energy. It gives you a sign that your works and message have hit home, and that is extremely important. It's the quintessence of joy," she says.

Modern-day problems and fears

Hinrikus' first children's book, a memoir about her parents' lives titled *Miia and Friida*, was published a decade ago already. Has she changed as a writer? Are the topics that speak to her now different? Hinrikus confirms they are. "I very much hope that I've developed over that period of time and

that every book has taught me something. Over the last few years, I've been fascinated in particular by the lives of children today; by their problems and fears. For instance, the fear of whether they'll find friends at a new school or of their parents working abroad. A mother's death, divorce, new family structures... Worrying that no one has time for anyone else in their family. Serious topics like those."

Hinrikus' books are also meant for parents to read to their children. Her latest, the awarded work *Catherine and the Peas*, tells of a father leaving his family and his daughter coming to grips with the situation. "Parents have told me they've read and discussed it together. That makes me happy. I've also had great encounters with schoolchildren. One time, there was a little girl sitting in the front row who spoke up during the Q and A session and told me: 'Your books are so great.' It wasn't even followed by a question. It was very moving."



KADRI HINRIKUS · PHOTO BY DMITRI KOTJUH

Hinrikus receives an ample amount of speaking invitations but accepts far from all of them. “A writer’s job is to write, not to be traveling around all the time. I’d like to have time for writing,” she says.

At the moment, Hinrikus is already working on a new book titled *Don’t Worry About Me*, which should be published in Estonian this fall. The work is a fairy-tale-like story set in a forest where mysterious creatures cohabitate and fly around with the animals, birds, and beetles. Topics she addresses include solitude, friendship, fears, the freedom to be just the way you are, and the fact that sometimes love and caring can turn harmful.

“Children shouldn’t always avoid solitude, either. Some kids actually need solitude a little more than others,” she says, adding that it’s not ideal for all children to

constantly attend various practices, participate in clubs, or hang out with their peers.

Everything settles in people

Hinrikus, who grew up in central Tallinn and currently lives in the Uus-Maailm district, has felt a strong pull towards books and reading her entire conscious life. “I was read to a lot when I was really little, and that’s how I became a big reader. My favorite subject at school was Estonian language and literature, I was keen to write essays, and I attended a literature-intensive class in high school.” Now, as an adult, quality time for Hinrikus means the days she’s able to push other obligations aside and work on writing from morning till evening, or to read a good book and truly delve into it.

“Everything settles in people. Just like [the Estonian classic] Ristikivi wrote: ‘even a

lizard's path across a stone leaves a trace.' All my experiences and emotions have slowly settled in me and matured. I've taken a stab at daring to write. I only began in my thirties," says Hinrikus, who by today has already published nine children's books.

Astrid Lindgren was Hinrikus' childhood favorite. "I'm afraid I'm unoriginal, but there's no way I can get past her books. I was read *The Six Bullerby Children* quite a lot and *Little Tjorven*, *Kalle Blomkvist*, and others are among my favorites. Books by other authors included *Winnie the Pooh*, [Eno Raud's] *The Three Jolly Fellows*, and a little later, [Aino Pervik's] *Arabella, the Pirate's Daughter*," the writer lists.

It was only later that Hinrikus came across Tove Jansson's *Moomin* series and *The Summer Book*, a novel for adults in which a grandmother and her grandchild discuss the world as they explore a small island in the Gulf of Finland. "Someone wrote that that book is about life itself, and can be read your whole life long. I hold Tove Jansson in very high regard."

Quality instead of glossy pictures

Hinrikus acknowledges that the children's books and literature currently being published have changed over time. Not long ago, an avalanche of translated glossy-paged picture books were being released in Estonia and the world of Disney was storming bookstores, but today, original Estonian children's literature is a very rich and diverse field. Writers are also taking on increasingly difficult topics. "Authors have become bolder. I hope that the children and teachers are, too," Hinrikus says. "I think it's great when children can take hope and

support from a book; when they start to perceive the variations in the world and the fact that truths and values are different."

The author says the Harry Potter series' exceptional popularity shows that children's interests have changed over the decades. "It's a remarkably important book. I can't compare it to a single one from my own childhood. Although fairy tales have always been around, kids these days are seemingly fascinated by more fantasy, mysticism, and alternate realities than before. I was fonder, personally, of more realistic types of books."

Hinrikus derives her ideas from life itself and has been inspired by other books on many occasions. "Your own mind starts drifting towards new ideas when you read an interesting book – something additional to what you hear and encounter in everyday life. For me, writing isn't toil and struggle; I thoroughly enjoy it. When I write, then I do so intensely. The rest of the time, I'm on standby and collecting my thoughts."

In addition to text, the illustration side of children's books is very important. An impressive eight different illustrators have done artwork for Hinrikus' nine books (only Anu Kalm worked on two). According to the author, every one of them has been fantastic, performing their art masterfully and with deep focus. Whereas words and illustrations form simultaneously in the case of some children's books, Hinrikus always completes her writing first.

Writing for children is far from as easy, as one might believe, because attracting and maintaining a child's attention is a fine art form these days. Every element of a book –

the design, illustrations, sentence lengths, font size, etc. – must work together to better captivate the reader. “You have to keep in mind that the reader is much smaller than you. You can’t write for them like you would for your grandmother,” Hinrikus says. Although she has her own control group for testing out new books, one composed of both students and relatives, Hinrikus trusts her intuition above all. “If something is nagging at me, then I have to keep working on it. However, when I’ve wrapped something up, then my intuition tells me that, too.”

Hinrikus says there are many positive aspects of Estonian society, but there are still quite a few things that could be improved: friendliness, tolerance, and respect for different opinions are lacking foremost. “There are so many people who believe they and they alone have a monopoly over truth. Everyone who thinks differently are rotten to the core and are doing everything wrong. People could behave more based on what Uku Masing once said: ‘being good is what’s most important. Everything proceeds from the way we treat people, animals, and nature.’”

A mood of peace-making with the world

Hinrikus says one can’t rule out the possibility that Estonians’ darker side is encoded in their genes. “Of course we’re depressing compared with more southern peoples. Let’s all read [Andrus Kivirähk’s] *November* and look ourselves in the eyes. Estonians have complex personalities, and the long Soviet period certainly wore people out. It left us with bitterness and fears that some other nations escaped. There’s especially a lot of bitterness. And we place an

exhausting emphasis on success. It’s like we’ve developed a cult of success that we instill in children at an early age, too. It’s a never-ending race and endless comparison of ourselves with one another. It seems like for many people, success and happiness are synonyms. In reality, though, I don’t believe it’s so straightforward.”

Hinrikus ventures into nature whenever possible, whether to hike in the woods or go sailing. “I don’t have the urge to leave Estonia for anywhere in summer, and in spring, I always want to see the birds arriving and the grass turning green. The season when the hackberry trees, chestnut trees, apple trees, lilacs, and rowans start to blossom is amazing. Their scents alone put you in the mood to make peace with the world.”

In the author’s opinion, people could learn to better enjoy what already exists. “In Estonia, life is beautiful and pure, both out in nature and in the cities. There are so many beautiful people; there’s so much good literature, music, and art. Estonians cook fantastic food. We’re able to speak in the Estonian language. It’s worth feeling delighted by all this and appreciating it. If we don’t do it ourselves, then no one else will do it for us. You can complain and find fault with everything to the bitter end. It’s worth seeing what’s good,” Hinrikus believes.

KRISTI HELME (b. 1979) directs the cultural desk of the daily newspaper *Eesti Päevaleht*. In addition to cultural life, she keeps a close eye on developments in Estonian education.

* Article first published in *Eesti Päevaleht* on April 28, 2018

EstLitFest: an open-air snow globe on foreign soil

by Adam Cullen

If ever there was a fitting location for a first-of-its-kind showcase of Estonian literature and culture in the Anglophone world, it was the Victorian-era former theater and cinema in London's Notting Hill: a space plucked from time, and in tune with vibrations on another level of consciousness. On the 13th and 14th of April 2018, this atemporal haven – Print Room at the Coronet – hosted EstLitFest; not simply a celebration of Estonian literature, music, thought, and food, but a fascinating exploration and dialogue regarding identity and the country in relation to the world today. Coming right off the heels of the London Book Fair, during which Estonia and several of its authors were spotlighted as a Market Focus Country (with one organizer calling the Baltic states' efforts "the most serious" she had ever seen), EstLitFest was a triumphant climax to a whirlwind week that already seemed at maximum volume: with it, the Estonian Literature Center truly turned the knob up to eleven.

Opening the festival was the artistic power couple of Silver Sepp and Kristiina Ehin.

Releasing sounds as ancient as the depths of Estonia's murky bog pits, and words that awakened long-dormant elements of the soul; they gave listeners the unearthly sense that ancestors had been summoned and were present throughout the space. As Ehin read her poetry in Estonian and English, including a moving lament about the recent spike in clear-cutting in Estonia, Sepp masterfully drew rhythms and melodies out of unexpected instruments, looping sounds and singing over the powerful foundation. A section of tree trunk with projecting nails of various lengths, played with a bow; the spokes of a bicycle wheel; a length of rubber tubing – genuine Finno-Ugric resourcefulness. Before one song, the musician told the audience he had intended to bring a set of hand-crafted, time- and weather-worn wooden skis along with him to London, but decided against it at the last minute. Upon arriving, he and Ehin regretted the choice and mentioned it to a local friend, who set off on a quest throughout the metropolis to find a suitable substitute: with a sly smile and a glint in his eyes, Sepp then proceeded to coax music from them.



ESTLITFEST WAS HELD AT THE PRINT ROOM IN THE HISTORIC CORONET THEATER IN NOTTING HILL, LONDON · PHOTOS BY PRIIT HÖBEMÄGI

Next on the program, following a short break for simple Estonian delicacies and a Baltic porter – crafted specially for the London Book Fair and the festival by the Estonian brewery Õllenaut – came the launch of Ilmar Taska’s novel *Pobeda 1946: A Car Called Victory*, translated by Christopher Moseley. An excerpt was read by professional British actors Anna Winslet (yes, sister to Kate) and Edmund Harcourt. Taska – who was born in Siberian exile – discussed the work and his own first-hand memories of Estonia’s painful history with BBC journalist Rosie Goldsmith, while Estonian jazz musicians Villu Veski and Tiit Kalluste provided foggy Nordic-inspired interludes. After enjoying warm Estonian snacks, the multinational crowd of festival-goers returned to the main stage to bathe in enchanting music performed by the Villu



KRISTINA EHIN AND SILVER SEPP

Veski and Robert Mitchell Jazz Quartet (EST-UK): a delight for the audience and the musicians alike, bringing to mind the alternating heat and chill of a seaside sauna session.

Early the next morning, the festival reopened with a family event for Estonian



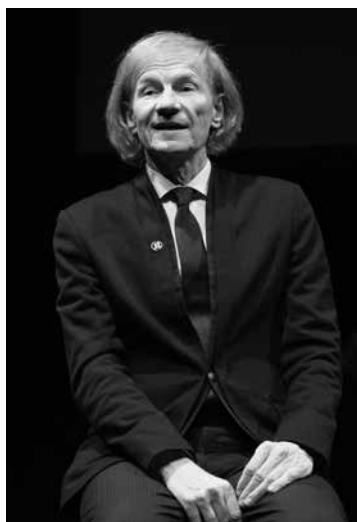
AMBASSADOR OF THE REPUBLIC OF ESTONIA TO THE UK TIINA INTEL-MANN, BBC JOURNALIST AND MODERATOR ROSIE GOLDSMITH, AND AUTHOR MIHKEL MUTT · PHOTOS BY PRIIT HOBEMÄGI



JAAK UNDUŠK



KAI AARELEID



ILMAR TASKA

and English children led by the Estonian poet, storyteller, and singer Veronika Kivisilla. For the adults, two translators of Estonian prose and poetry into English – Miriam McIlfatrick-Ksenofontov and yours truly – discussed the challenges and joys of revoicing Estonian authors' words and intrinsically-embedded meanings in their native English. From there, the festival roared on with an exhilarating array of topics and speakers. Highlights included

Marika Mägi, James Graham-Campbell, and Mart Kuldkepp delving into the history of Estonian Vikings and the uniting element of the Baltic Sea; Estonian author and opinion columnist Mihkel Mutt speculating as to the future of the nation state in Europe from Estonia's perspective; Russian-Estonian author Andrei Ivanov in conversation with novelist and BBC journalist Zinovy Zinik about the complex issues of language, identity, and nationality; and transcendent

poetry by the celebrated author Doris Kareva, read and discussed with her translator Miriam McIlfattrick-Ksenofontov. The prize-winning British novelist and poet Philip Gross also discussed the motives and song behind Kareva's works with the author, all suspended on updrafts of music by Veski and Kalluste.

Closing the spectacular official festival program was a rousing performance by the Estonian folk ensemble Rüüt. Yet, in the true spirit of an Estonian celebration, the evening continued into the early hours of the morning with traditional cuisine prepared by chef Enn Tobreluts and spontaneous runic singing that united performers and guests alike in one of the most ancient of Estonian customs.

EstLitFest seemed to open a fairy doorway into what lies behind and within the very

essence of Estonian literature and culture. The walls of the historical theater were cupped around an open-air snow globe on foreign soil, a phenomenon that enabled both the Estonians and international guests to explore and engage in wide-ranging topics from an entirely different perspective. To truly see and begin to fathom oneself and the beauty of traditions, a step must be taken in another direction – sometimes across an entire sea.

ADAM CULLEN (b. 1986) is a poet and translator of Estonian prose, poetry, and drama into English. His most recent literary translations include Kai Aareleid's *Burning Cities*, Mehis Heinsaar's *The Butterfly Man and Other Stories*, Mihkel Mutt's *The Inner Immigrant*, and Rein Raud's *The Reconstruction*.



BRITISH AUTHOR ZINOVY ZINIK CONVERSING WITH AN ESTONIAN-RUSSIAN AUTHOR
ANDREI IVANOV · PHOTO BY PRIIT HÖBEMÄGI

Being one with the world, i.e. why leave home?

An interview with Viivi Luik

by Aija Sakova

Viivi Luik's collection of essays titled *Pildi ilu rikkumise paratamatus* (The Inevitability of Ruining the Picture's Beauty), which also includes several pieces written outside of Estonia, was published in 2017. In August, Cornelius Hasselblatt's German translation of Luik's novel *Varjuteater* (Shadow Theater) was published by Wallstein. Intrigued by the questions of identity, travel, and living abroad that surface in these two works, Luik and I spoke about why it's necessary to leave one's home country from time to time and observe it from afar.

You lived away from Estonia for a great many years: almost 18 in total. In what cities have you lived?

Helsinki, Berlin, Rome, Riga, Stockholm, New York, and for a little while in Switzerland, too, but not that long.

Which of those places are still dear to you today? Or, maybe I'll ask: which of those places would you move to again today?

I might say Rome and Berlin. Not because they're awfully dear to me or anything, but because they are interesting in their contradictoriness. They convey the world's diversity and, in a certain sense, my own two contradictory sides as well. I could speak at long length about how Rome and Berlin are very different but form some kind of a whole for me regardless.

***Shadow Theater* – which is a novel or a travelogue, however one wishes to name it – is one journey to Rome. In it, you claim that you've always been on your way to Rome, in a sense. The thought of having been born in Soviet Estonia, growing up in the mid-fifties, and feeling that you're on your way to Rome is simultaneously unusual and self-evident.**

I believe that when you are a child, even if it was in the fifties, you're entirely indifferent to the whole political system or the fact that borders are closed. It doesn't matter to a child. A child is free. She can reckon that she'll go wherever she pleases. It's not really strange from that perspective.

A child sees a picture of the Colosseum, which you also wrote into *Shadow Theater*, and that becomes her goal in a way.



VIIVI LUIK · PHOTO BY ALAR TRUU / ÕHTULEHT / SCANPIX

Exactly. I've said or written somewhere before that children are children everywhere. What matters to a child is that someone loves her. Even in the most trying conditions, even in a concentration camp, it's important to a child to have that one person who loves and cares for her. Everything else is negligible. To a child, every reality is here and now, just as it was with the Stalinist Estonia I address in the book. To a child, all roads are open and everything is possible at first.

Turning to the Estonian language, you've quoted lines from a poem by Paul-Eerik Rummo: "stuck to an axe by your tongue, stuck to a cold axe by your native tongue".

When you live amidst a small national culture and you know that its language is spoken by very few people, then you're tied to that language in a very exceptional way. Just like how your tongue will stick to a cold axe in an exceptionally painful



way. Everyone knows that if you stick your tongue to cold metal, it will freeze to it and will be very painful. It's a common school-boy trick: they'll always try to find someone younger who hasn't heard of it yet and tell them to give it a try. That's where the axe and tongue metaphor originates.

When a child says her first words in Estonian, she is destined for the Estonian linguistic space. She's stuck to an axe by her tongue and must accept the responsibility it entails. She is born with that responsibility.

I've given much thought to how your writing contains an element of paradox in regards to the Estonian language. Estonian is your means of expression, and still, it's clear that you had to get away from Estonia; had to leave; had to live those 18 years away from here. It's a personal dimension, on the one hand, but there's also something more universal about it. It is obvious that your works, your books, do belong to Estonia, but they also belong outside of Estonia; they belong to world literature, because their conversation partners lie outside of Estonia, for

the most part. It's a fascinating paradox. The inevitability of existing and discoursing with literature outside of Estonia and, at the same time, doing so in the Estonian language.

The topic of our interview was the question of why one needs to travel outside of Estonia. I suppose I'll try to answer why it's necessary for someone to have that experience, to have been away, and to have seen everything she lives among today; and where she might otherwise live more consciously.

One thing a person discovers when she has lived elsewhere is, it suddenly becomes clear that in every location around the world there might be a person – no matter what color their skin or what gender or what religion – whom your life could depend upon one day. All this time, that person – let's say a black woman in New York – has existed and lived her own life without you knowing anything about her or she about you. Then one day, some crucial aspects of your life depend precisely upon her. Or else upon a doctor somewhere at the far corner of the world. These dependences upon one another become especially clear during wars. All those people whom we might depend upon one day also exist right now.

Could that also be called being one with the world?

It is discovering your belonging to the world by truly peculiar means, but it's also a discovery of your own homeland in an entirely new way. The recognition helps you to see differently; to realize your home is much better than how you've grown accustomed to it.

In addition to discovering homeland in a new way, this is also the act of discovering yourself in a new way, the understanding that you depend upon others. That makes you less pompous...

It makes you humbler. The perception that all those people and places with whom and with which you'll later come into contact also exist during your childhood, with the exception of those who haven't been born yet – that makes the world very deep and very different. It's the understanding that everything exists at once; that the whole world is happening now and all at the same time.

Is a desire to leave one's home and homeland for some time also something that can be condemned?

No, I certainly don't believe that. The fact that people who do a job and want to become very good at something in their field will move around has always held true. Even now, for instance, there still exist handicraft guilds in Germany, even though they're small. Whoever wants to become a master at some craft must spend at least three years away from their homeland during their journeyman years, i.e. their studies. Only then may they return.

It's an inevitable period of maturing and getting experience, which doesn't mean it must or should only happen in youth. It can be done later, too. It, likewise, doesn't mean someone loses their ties to their homeland. On the contrary. The person develops a new relationship that might be a little more critical, but might also be clearer. It's a little like saying when you're away from

home, you're better able to appreciate your homes.

I suppose all those who have traveled and been away have experienced that. As soon as you've gone on a trip, your thoughts start progressing differently and you have the opportunity to look at things in a new light. I wonder if it isn't the same in human relationships, too. When you're too close to a person, you don't see them or what's going on between you as clearly. You no longer see the big picture. When you take a step back, then you can observe. Perhaps it's a little similar to one's homeland.

It is. But, of course, it's quite a different thing when people leave in the hopes of making more money elsewhere. Or when they do so out of contempt or resentment. Then, those who leave see rather quickly that life elsewhere is much harder than at home. Some dare to return then, others don't. Some stay elsewhere to suffer, because it takes courage and strength when you wish to make your own in a foreign land. It takes a lot of work. It's not like you can go abroad and everything will simply fall into your lap. It takes more effort than at home. Going elsewhere with lower goals is no form of growth. Then, we're talking about something else – about a certain kind of growth and expansion.

AIJA SAKOVA (1980) is an Estonian literary scholar and critic. Since 2017, she has been a senior researcher at the Estonian Literary Museum's Estonian Cultural History Archives.

One nature, one mind, one cloud

The ecognosis of Aare Pilv

by Hasso Krull

Clouds have meaning. The meaning is indistinct and floating, but is simultaneously constant and incessantly turning back. We cannot imagine life without clouds, nor can we imagine clouds not meaning anything. When the sky is cloudy, it might rain; when the clouds are dark and dense, it's oppressive; when there's not a cloud in the sky, we say there's "nice weather out", but the weather can also be nice when lone white clouds are drifting slowly across the sky. Clouds can be blood red, yolk yellow, silver gray, or ochery; they amplify the light of sunset and morning dawn; they streak, spread, and disperse. Clouds hold a special place in classic Chinese hermit poetry. Tao Yuanming would observe the slowly-passing clouds; in Wang Wei's poems, they refer to Buddhism and monks reading the sutras; Hanshan, on the other hand, dances with white clouds or uses them as a pillow. Clouds are associated with mountains and the benefits and simplicity of hermetic life, and are contrasted with the city, royal court life, bureaucracy, and all the "world's dust". Down below in the world of man, clouds are watched with a sense of yearning because

they are so close to the heavens. Above, in the mountains, clouds become a symbol of peace of mind. Thus, clouds lie in the heights, but are not entirely inaccessible. In fact, it is possible to reach the clouds and even come into direct contact with them. This can be done physically, through the strain of climbing, but can also be done while sitting in place by way of mental exercises – and, of course, one can reach the clouds with the help of wine and poetry. It seems that poetry is, in a certain sense, a cloud.

Clouds are eponymous in Aare Pilv's poetry, to a certain degree.¹ This became clear as early as his book *Tema nimi on kohus* (His Name is Duty, 1999), where watching the clouds is a theme in and of itself, and is unquestionably tied to self-reflection:

"Hot days. In the evenings, I lie on my back, staring up and trying to perceive the

1 *The Estonian word pilv (also the last name of the author in focus) translates to "cloud" in English.*



distance between myself and the clouds. Sometimes it works, but sometimes the image of the clouds flattens into a picture on my retina that has no spatiality. I attempt to overcome the levelling; to brush the fabric of height and distance with my senses.”² (T, 17)

Observing the clouds provides a key to spatial perception: if even the clouds are spatial, then everything that lies between Pilv and the clouds is also spatial; flattening is no longer possible. At the same time, observing clouds also tunes Pilv in, to capture nuances, undertones, and transitions:

“In the evenings, I lie on my back, staring up and trying to give names to the colors of the sky. Sometimes it works, but sometimes the transitions between tones cannot be notated...” (T, 18)

The narrator reckons he wouldn’t bother to stare at a picture or a photograph for as long, because he would start searching for meaning. When staring at actual clouds, however, he can “abandon that presumption of meaning”. This of course doesn’t apply to poetry, because the clouds immediately acquire strong meaning. Still, it is a contemplative, even meditative meaning, because clouds are watched to *liberate* oneself from excessive meaning. Thus, clouds

become the base and a condition for a certain ascetic aestheticism.

This ascetic aestheticism deepens in the author’s following books. Pilv doesn’t only watch the clouds, of course, he watches many things. However, cloud-watching remains the model that allows him to “abandon the presumption of meaning” and watch simply for the sake of watching, as if doing so from the opposite end of the world. This type of watching requires certain ocular techniques that Pilv also strives to define: “By ocular techniques, I mean the way the eyes become ‘conscious’ of their viewing and seeing abilities by way of viewing and seeing.” (NT, 12) To reword this as simply as possible: it is a meditative manner of identification where things are not viewed externally, but from within, going along with their idiosyncratic time. In contemporary philosophical terms, this posture can also be called object-oriented ontology, because the person is transported to the same level as objects. He is simply one thing among many. Timothy Morton has written of what he calls “ecognosis” – an ecological manner of perception in which being and seeing are perpetually tied without ever actually intersecting:

“Ecognosis implies that being and appearing are intertwined because ecognosis bends around on itself. Ecognosis is a self-knowing awareness that doesn’t imply an infinite regress of metaness, but a strange loop instead.”³

The first unique quality of Pilv’s poetry can now be derived; he has turned seeing into a

2 Henceforth, I cite Pilv’s books with a system of abbreviations: P – Päike ehk päike (Sun i.e. Sun). Tartu: Erakkond, 1998; T – Tema nimi on kohus (His Name is Duty). Tartu: Erakkond, 1999; NT – Nägemist (See You). Tallinn: Tuum, 2002; NE – Näoline (Visaged). Tallinn: Tuum, 2007; R – Ramadaan (Ramadan). Tallinn: Tuum, 2010; K – Kui vihm saab läbi (When the Rain Ends). Tallinn: Tuum, 2017.

3 Timothy Morton, *Dark Ecology: For a Logic of Future Coexistence*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2016, p 98.

method, more than anyone else in contemporary Estonian poetry. One could say Pilv not only watches watching, but *sees seeing*. The seeing of seeing is a self-reflective loop that reveals non-human “being” within the seer himself. We can now create a whole range of other self-reflecting loops based on the same pattern: the thinking of thinking, the feeling of feeling, the perception of perception, and the remembering of remembering. Pilv has indeed done all this, achieving a rare proximity to things and beings that are not himself – all the way up to the distant clouds.

A second unique quality of Pilv’s poetry stems from his relationship to language. It already began taking shape in his second poetry collection *Sun i.e. Sun* (1998), which is packed with a variety of linguistic experiments. The work is simultaneously Pilv’s most multi-stylistic to date: he tries out poetic possibilities with obvious glee, though he does not occupy himself with them as intensely in later collections. The book is intertextually lush. Its style sprouts and flourishes like weeds in an overgrown garden; a single phrase can be reproduced in a dozen different versions.

This type of approach to language also requires a rethinking of poetic form. Pilv has done so, and, as a result, focuses on prose poetry as his most contradictory and high-opportunity genre-based experiment. It seems no one has worked as much on Estonian prose poetry over the last twenty-five years as Pilv, although other authors may surpass him in terms of volume (i.e. Jan Kaus and Jüri Kolk). Pilv plugs away on the border between prose and poetry with Baudelaire-like intensity as if he intends to one day finally determine what it is that makes poetry poetic. Here, he must of course

employ dreamlike elements, childhood memories, fragmentation, and unexpected twists. One of his most outstanding pieces is “The Assumption of Mary in the Capital”. In the piece he describes certain events in Tallinn in meticulous detail till the final line, which gives the entire preceding poem an entirely different meaning: “whether I stayed in the capital or took the next bus home, I don’t even know, because that’s when I woke up.” (NE, 17) The ordinary day turned out to be a dream, but it is similarly a variation on the well-known topos “everything’s all a dream”. Similar “resolutions” appear in his description of a Viljandi museum that he claims is actually a telephone call (K, 20–21). As well as in the biography of a relative named Selma from deep in the countryside, which is liberated of excessive meaning by her own favorite saying, “That’s the way life is.” (K, 17) One has the sense of the fabric being unraveled as soon as it has been woven. This unravelling can also be visualized as a stage production – like in the miniature play *Coffee Cup*, where an actor spills a coffee cup, then walks to the edge of the stage and recites the description of the performance word for word, asking in conclusion: “If this were the sole event in a person’s life – holding an unlidded cup of coffee too tightly with the intention of reaching the edge of the stage – then what would you think of it?” (K, 50) After that, an “open discussion” takes place with the audience, which is nothing other than “open unravelling”.

It is here that a certain conceptualism slowly hatches – the third quality characterizing Pilv’s poetry. First, watching is turned into a method that becomes seeing seeing; then, he begins experimenting with language, plugging away on the border between poetry and prose while trying

out various styles, forms of wordplay, and intertextual transformations; and finally, he applies the seeing method on the language itself, watching the linguistic massifs like the passing of clouds.

In my opinion, Pilv's conceptualism achieves perfection in his latest book *When the Rain Ends* (2017). The author did his own book design, presenting the text so geometrically that every line becomes part of a great black-and-white row of clouds. This means the book can also be simply viewed, gazing at the poems like passing clouds while occasionally pausing to read one attentively. The composition is not linear and under no circumstances must one read the pieces from the first page to the last in progression, but the poems all support one another and the style seems to become increasingly material and tactile. It seems this is a book that Pilv has wanted to make for a long time, and finally has. Of course, clouds also rise in *When the Rain Ends*, but surprisingly, they are now seen in a forest through the trees:

“my mind throbs and beats and shimmers
when it looks behind my eye
at those incidental clouds in the woods
between trees,
it has its own style for doing so,
a tiny needle-like remembering stitches
the wordings into nerves.
my nature ponders, standing before clouds,
incredulously, naturedly, inevitably,
gladly and earnestly, then takes
a couple steps and peers out from behind
my eye,
it sees – tea, sandwiches, writing –
cloudy incidentalness here, too. strange,
it thinks, I have my own style.”

(K, 76, translation by Adam Cullen)

The mind peers at clouds behind the eye, but his nature stands directly before them. There's no doubt that here, Pilv is attempting to present his whole seeing technique in a concentrated form; his whole language-seeing and seeing-language. This type of posture resembles, in fact, ancient Chinese hermit poetry; Hanshan's dance with the white clouds. To use the hermit typology of the Han Dynasty era, Pilv himself would be a *shi-yin*: a city hermit who lives among others but still respects the values and principles of true hermits.⁴ Peering from behind the eye is the *meel*, the mind, which the Estonian dictionary defines as “the reception of certain types of senses and the ability to differentiate” and has a Chinese-like feel to it. Yet the *loom*, nature, which stands before the clouds and ponders “incredulously, naturedly, inevitably, gladly, and earnestly” is already more complex and harder to define. In old Estonian, the word meant “a created being”, but does not necessarily require an external creator (as the Latin *creatura* would presume). The *loom* is simultaneously natural and animalistic; it is a force that sets the *meel* in motion and gives it substance. Without the *loom* (nature), the *meel* (mind) would merely be an abstract function. However, both are intrigued by the “cloudy serendipity” where being and emergence are intertwined. This “cloudy serendipity” is a non-human component within thought and perception. One's nature is a pure force, but pure force is also a cloud. Thus, nature is a kind of inner cloud, a “cloudy serendipity” within the viewer himself. And in truth, the mind is a part of that nature; a certain aspect of it that enables one to observe nature and

⁴ See Pertti Seppälä, “Saatteeksi” in: Wang Wei, *Vuorten sini*, pp 8–9

cloud simultaneously without their force ever being exhausted. Nature and cloud are greater and mightier than the mind.

All this gives rise to an irresistible feeling that Pilv is expressing a particular mystery here. To do so, he indeed had to create his “own style” with which he could be as precise as possible. This mystery has nothing to do with the otherworld in the ordinary sense of the word. Pilv rather tends to avoid supernatural contacts. Why this is the case becomes clear in a very early prose poem, in which he describes a chilling childhood experience:

“One of my childhood fears was a painting that stared back at me. I dreaded it by day, and it was a reproduction of the *Mona Lisa* that hung above Mother’s desk in our old apartment. [...] The worst part wasn’t looking directly at it, but that when I did, it appeared as if she was moving her lips – very unnoticeably. I was about as afraid of it as one fears snapping monsters beneath the bed or the corners of a dark room. I couldn’t bear the thought that someone from that other world was connecting to this one. (P, 12)”

A force that belongs to an entirely different time and place might arrive from the other side but still strive to say something, moving its lips “very unnoticeably”. The word pair is in fact a pleonasm, because if something is already unnoticeable, one won’t notice it anyway – so, how can it additionally be “very unnoticeable”? *Mona Lisa* doesn’t actually move her lips, not noticeably or unnoticeably – what makes the lips move is the gaze of the painting’s watcher. The lips’ movement isn’t seen, but rather the lips are moved by *watching itself*. However, this type of tendency is dangerous, because now, the seeing itself is not seen. Instead,



one sees the vision caused by seeing alone: a visual hallucination. The supernatural otherworldliness may kill the mystery that Pilv yearns to capture in this world. That is precisely why Pilv desires the dual-meaning *Nägemist* (See You) in the title of his most agenda-based book. Although the initial sense would be seeing someone again, the second and more important sense is seeing’s seeing, which is emphasized once more on the final page: “when you close the book / then / open eyes”. (NT, 88) One only truly learns to see when they don’t watch a picture, but rather the clouds. Then, the viewer’s mind gradually appears and, finally, the nature residing behind it. That is precisely Pilv’s ecognostic mystery: one nature, one mind, one cloud.

HASSO KRULL (b. 1964) is an author of a dozen poetry books and five volumes of essays. He has written extensively about poetry, mythology and various other subjects, including philosophy and politics, and translated poetry and theoretical works from French, English, Finnish etc. In 2001 he co-founded a web magazine Ninniku that has published poetry translations from more than forty languages.

Book reviews

by Maria Lee Liivak, Peeter Helme, Oliver Berg and Maarja Helena Meriste

LEELO TUNGAL · PHOTO BY ALAR TUUL / ÕHTULEHT / SCANPIX



LEELO TUNGAL *SELTSIMEES LAPS* (COMRADE KID)

Tänapäev, 2018. 512 pp
ISBN 9789949853076

Leelo Tungal's *Comrade Kid* trilogy – *Comrade Kid and the Grownups* (2008), *Velvet and Sawdust: Comrade Kid and the Letters* (2009), and *A Woman's Touch: Comrade Kid and Dad* (2018) – tells about a five-year period undergone by a family, a nation, and, above all, an energetic,

rapidly-growing young girl. Moonika Siimets' debut feature film based on the trilogy was also released this year and, just like the book, received exceptionally glowing praise.

Already several generations of Estonians have grown up with Leelo Tungal's poetry, lyrics, and novels. The author's unmistakable unique literary style and manner of expression are familiar and cozy even to those who aren't big fans of literature. In *Comrade Kid*, Tungal's bright, wholly kind,

and fluid style of writing initially appears impossible to maintain in the service of its task. The entire novel, together with its brilliant characters, animated conversations, and rich descriptions, which smoothly form into imagery, are framed by the story of a three-year-old girl whose mother is deported to Siberia. Tungal follows the child's five years of longing for her absent parent and undying expectations that Mom will finally return home, someday.

Tungal's mother Helmes Tungal, who worked as a teacher at Ruila Elementary School, was deported to Siberia in 1950; charged with treason against her homeland. Specifically, Helmes had led a Kodutütred club (the Estonian equivalent of Girl Scouts) and had taught children "fascist" songs by composers such as Mozart and Beethoven; to top it off, several of her close relatives had already fallen victim to the Red terror. It's natural and understandable that stories and memories of the horrors, poverty, fear, and tragedy that came in the wake of World War II are an extremely tender subject for Estonians to this day. Viivi Luik's now-classic *The Seventh Spring of Peace* (1985) likewise described the early 1950s in Estonia through the eyes of a small child and, due to the era, Tungal's and Luik's memories share several commonalities. However, while Estonians remember *The Seventh Spring of Peace* primarily as a mournful, depressing, and occasionally even bitter work, *Comrade Kid* has managed to depict the tragedy of one child, family, and historical period with a strange (resulting from the horrors of the situation) sense of warm humor. Even the subtitle on the book's title page calls it "Another tale of a happy childhood", which is of course an ironic jab at the "happy children" of the USSR. Still, literary-Leelo's childish merriment seems

to endure against all odds and comfort the readers themselves.

Raised by her father after her mother's deportation, childhood-Leelo is surrounded by a big family, many jovial adults (a product of her father's especially good-natured personality), dogs, books, and dolls. She eagerly listens in on adults' conversations, which are always accompanied by anxious pleas not to repeat them to anyone else – because the NKVD has eyes and ears everywhere. Little Leelo listens to the cheerful Pioneer songs about the great Soviet homeland playing on the radio, sings along enthusiastically, and wonders why her grown-up relatives don't like red flags or Lenin. The young girl visits Tallinn with her aunts, painting vivid bygone pictures of streets filled with officers' wives, cafés, and Old Town's Town Hall Square filled with taxis. Nostalgic memories of pre-occupation Estonia and the family's former wealth and happiness surface perennially in grown-ups' conversations.

Comrade Kid is a rare specimen in terms of its highly precise level of detail. Books based on childhood memories often operate within a dreamlike landscape, but although dreams (mostly nightmares) play an important role in Tungal's work, the spaces, scents, situations, discussions, and even the thoughts of a small child that her words create are uncommonly clear, coherent, and linear. It is a book that smoothly delivers itself to the reader; one that the reader is reluctant to finish too quickly, even though the sense of longing for Leelo's mother also haunts them throughout the entire work. Turning each page in tense anticipation, one wonders: will Leelo's unjustly deported mother come home from that distant cold land at last? **MLL**



TRIINU MERES

LIHTSAD VALIKUD (SIMPLE CHOICES)

Varrak, 2017. 272 pp
ISBN 9789985342176

TRIINU MERES

KUNINGATE TAGASITULEK (THE RETURN OF THE KINGS)

Orpheuse Raamatukogu 33. Fantaasia, 2018.
395 pp
ISBN 9789949578832

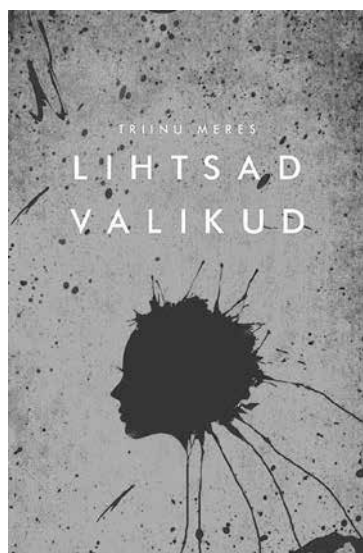
Triinu Meres has rocketed into the starry sky of Estonian literature over a very brief period of time. Just last year, her debut novel *Simple Choices* shared second and third place with Eva Koff's *The Blue Hill* in the Estonian Writers' Union's Novel Competition, and this summer, it won Estonia's Stalker Award for Science Fiction.

As if that weren't enough, Meres released her second work soon after: a thick post-apocalyptic dystopian novel titled *The Return of the Kings*.

But going back to the beginning, *Simple Choices* is essentially a detective sci-fi work

that revolves around three women with very different motives and ambitions. Each of them offers three possible perspectives and three possible answers to the ethical dilemmas the book poses. In addition to ethical questions and contradictions between the main characters' consciences and obligations, the novel has the kind of "world-building" that usually piques sci-fi fans' interest.

Namely, the author has succeeded in creating a society founded on moral and interpersonal conventions unlike those on Earth. Even so, the differences aren't all that great and one can't rule out the possibility that we, with our level of technological advancement and increasing deficiency of resources, are on a path towards Meres' society. At the same time, one has a budding sense of peculiarity when reading about human relationships often treated as utilitarian by the partners involved, drawing a clear distinction between the physical and emotional aspects. It is a strange but pragmatic approach, seeing as how the characters inhabiting that world live behind closed doors on a planet with a hostile natural



environment, and keep strict track of their available resources.

We encounter something similar in Meres' *The Return of the Kings*. Although it belongs to today's over-exploited genre of post-apocalyptic dystopia, the sense of unfamiliarity we experience in regard to the world revealed to us plays a very important role.

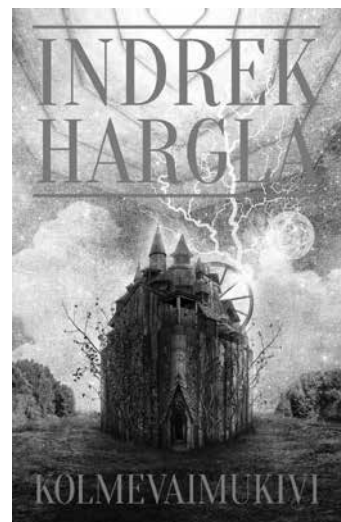
"Hostile" also defines the environment in *The Return of the Kings*: 287 years ago, something called "the Bang" took place and put an end to civilization as we know it. A handful of states practicing their own politics and ambitions still exist beyond the wasteland that serves as the story's setting. Survival tends to be the characters' primary objective; yes, they have their own goals and endeavors, but these are overshadowed by the brutal struggle to stay alive. The characters aren't exactly proficient at this task, I might add, because they are in no way the top predators of the harsh and wintry world. Perched at the top of the food chain are the "kings": gigantic, remarkably strong and fast humanoid carnivores who

significantly differ from humans in terms of intellect. They are seemingly primitive but occasionally display ancient wisdom. They are bloodthirsty, and at the same time bursting with sexuality.

The kings are the key to the book, but at the same time, they tend to be encompassed by empty space the reader would like to probe further: one filled with more details and more answers to the questions that arise at the beginning of the book concerning their nature, origins, and the degrees to which they are more man or more beast. Fascinatingly woven into this is the human characters' inner struggles. Whether it be the heroine of the first part of the book: Raun, a female soldier who has fallen head-over-heels in love with her superior officer Katya; Jänene, the chief character of the middle section, who is a scientist and a reclusive hunter studying the kings in the wastelands; or Karen, one of the several protagonists in the third part of the work who appears earlier as one of the important outcasts who endeavor to keep the wolf from the door and survive in the wastelands.

Thus, society remains a central focus in *The Return of the Kings*: its transformation and resilience, the formation of new and unusual social constructs, and the question of how to remain human in extreme conditions. The "kings" are a thrilling addition, though in the end they remain mere thrills and the reader is left to figure out the answers on their own.

Whether intentional or not, Meres has proven not only her own masterful literary skill, but also the fact that Estonian sci-fi is able to compete even outside the narrow limits of fandom literature.



INDREK HARGLA
KOLMEVAIMUKIVI
 (THE THREE-SPIRIT STONE)

Raudhammas, 2018. 425 pp
 ISBN 9789949985166

This spring, Indrek Hargla published a hefty collection of short stories titled *Kolmevaimukivi* (*The Three-Spirit Stone*). It contains both shorter and longer prose – some pieces already published earlier and others in print for the first time – that can all be grouped under the word *ulme*: a concept unique to the Estonian language that combines the genres of science fiction, fantasy, and horror. Altogether, there are 15 pieces of varying length between the book’s covers. The longest, “The Secret of Mirabilia” (120 pages), is a short novel, while a few of the shorter morsels totaling only a couple of pages were novelettes previously published in the Estonia media, commissioned or written for popular Christmas- or summer columns. Compositionally, Hargla’s shorter stories alternate with his longer ones. Although the structure works very well, allowing the reader to engage in lighter reading experiences between the longer pieces that offer greater concentration and

broader reaches, the shorter stories’ quality is significantly more irregular. Even so, taking into account the shorter stories’ genres, this choppiness is understandable: pieces written for weekly publications are more time-sensitive by their very nature. Nevertheless, successful outcomes are to be found, especially the pieces that can be classified as ethno- or folk-horror. As the author himself has remarked in interviews, “ethno-horror” is a truly authentic Estonian phenomenon in the kaleidoscopic world of sci-fi, fantasy, and horror, and as a result, it is the task of Estonian writers to practice it. Indeed, examples such as Hargla’s short story “Christmas Forces”, which tells of Stalin-era deportations, or his horror story “The Grain Silo of Tammõküla Village”, which revolves around a pagan sacrifice stone, are hair-raising tales that skillfully weave Estonian history, storytelling traditions, and the art of tension-building. One could probably even say that the folk horror stories, above all the particularly lengthy title story “The Three-Spirit Stone”, form a strong thread throughout the collection.

However, this thread is not alone. Another genre in which Hargla excels, inviting the

reader to simultaneously smile and ponder along with him, is alternative-history ulme. Perhaps his best to date in this genre is the story “Clemens Fellinus, Rex Estonicum”, which appeared in the anthology *Eestid, mida ei olnud* (*The Estonias That Weren't*, 2017). The story paints an alternate picture where the famous historical figure Lembitu of Lehola, who battled the German conquerors in 13th-century Estonia, becomes a champion of Christianity in the country. Though inherently unusual and seemingly comical at first, Hargla’s story “Einstein’s Last Words” is nearly as strong as the previous: flying saucers interfere in World War II, giving it a bizarre turn, and the world is a better place for it in several respects. However, it means the genre of science fiction as we know it never comes to be, because its best minds – such as Arthur C. Clarke and Isaac Asimov – choose careers as scientists instead. A cherry on the cake here is the character Gustav Naan, an infamous Estonian communist and academic, to whom Hargla imparts a much more positive image than contemporary Estonian historians do. As I mentioned before, however, the story’s humor is only superficial and in fact, Hargla poses questions about how non-alternative our world really is.

Another of the shorter pieces in the collection also falls into the alternative-history genre: “The Case of the Penningbüttel Ghost”. Although the piece certainly doesn’t hold any profound ideas, it gives readers a good feel for the author’s method. Entertaining elements are woven around a simple, downright silly steam-punk “ghost-buster” story, creating concise devices by establishing a colorful vision of a greater world.

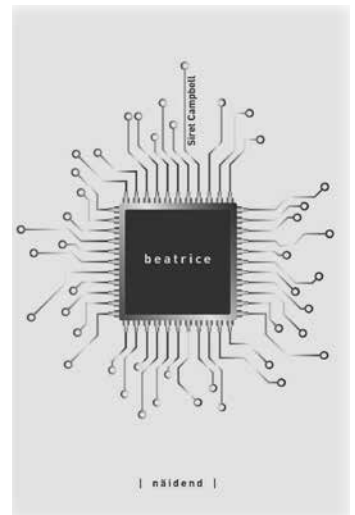
As a whole, and with its variety in terms of style and genre, the work confirms what Hargla asserts in the book’s very introduction: Estonian ulme is an elite literary league. **PH**

SIRET CAMPBELL

BEATRICE

Siret Campbell, 2018. 60 pp
ISBN 9789949880256

Near-future sci-fi is a disquieting genre: it depicts a world we do not yet know, but which doesn’t seem impossible in the least if we observe the reality around us and apply a little bit of fantasy to current trends. Siret Campbell’s play *Beatrice*, which won the latest Cultural Endowment of Estonia’s



Award for Drama, is like a domestic shard of Black Mirror, grimly questioning whether the technological developments that make our lives ever simpler are actually in accord with man's deepest nature.

At the focus of the play is a young man named Tom, who in chats over coffee would come off more as a cyber-sceptic and a defender of natural means. Yet when the fundamental natural structure he has built his life around collapses (his wife, the mother of his newborn son, is killed), the only way he sees out of the situation is to simulate naturalness. He has his late wife's recorded consciousness "implanted" in a donor body, and Beatrice is born.

Through Beatrice's character and several other elements, the play alludes to the last part of Dante's *Divine Comedy*: his journey through Paradise and the afterlife where Beatrice is his guide. Dante has only seen Beatrice twice in his mortal days, though she represented his divine ideal woman throughout his life. The backwardness of this situation lies in the fact that Tom's ideal woman was his actual wife who bore him a child; still, after reviving her consciousness in Beatrice's body, he is yet unable to return to that paradise. Tom's *Beatrice* becomes a kind of guide in her postmortem life, similarly representing paradise lost: the real individual who had been in Tom's life.

The cycle of problems in Beatrice revolves around copying and pasting, though much more deeply than the words themselves would have one expect. Electronic data storage promises to preserve that, which is tragically temporal in nature – or so it seems at first. Yet with the help of his own mother, Tom comes to realize that a natural

means of data storage also exists: his wife lives on in their child, and ultimately, he must acknowledge the fact that humans lack the mental readiness to accept all of technology's wonders. *Beatrice* is a sensitive, tightly-assembled cyber-drama, and is one of the few plays to have garnered so much interest as an independent literary work in recent years. Justifiably so.

ANDRA TEEDE

PIKAD MEHED, PIKAD ELUD (TALL MEN, LONG LIVES)

Jumalikud ilmutused, 2018. 70 pp.
ISBN 9789949519934

Andra Teede is a poet and a playwright whose literary profile has been described as sharp-tongued, humorous, and self-ironic, yet sensitive. *Pikad mehed, pikad elud* (*Tall Men, Long Lives*) is her seventh poetry collection. The perceptual majority of Teede's poetry can be compared to a landing strip. The narrator touches down from a recent ground-shaking life situation or a mundane moment that sticks in the mind; often a long, boozy night spent with someone important. It appears the narrator is seeking her lost center in all those persons and moments. Grounded in the poetry, the author's tone is frequently laced with sarcasm and a hangover-like fatigue – still, the layer of harshness is gentle and thin, and a fragile, wounded soul pushes out through the cracks.

Teede doesn't create grand abstractions in her poetry, but rather allows life's details to acquire symbolic weight on their own – and given the nature of poetry, this process happens independently. Perpetually present in this is the big-picture-seeking writer's skepticism of simple happiness that can be



perceived at any given moment: “I made deli-meat rolls on your dad’s birthday / and was interested in only that / and I didn’t have a single deadline / but only a great and warm sense of belonging / who says how to bear that happiness / of being here with all of you / beneath the same roof / is that enough / twenty years from now will I think / this here is it // or will I never even remember such trivialities / in the framework of my whole life” (p 33).

While the narrator focuses primarily on a loved or hated man (or men?), she bounces back to her ancestors in the quest for that big picture; for guiding wisdom. Women who have lived long lives and lasted long years at their husbands’ sides – can anything be learned from them?

“every so often I think about / what my parents knew about love / ... / every so often I think / if there’s anything to teach at all / then they could have taught me / how to measure love is that enough” (pp 12–13)

Alas, when you possess only chaotic shards of experience instead of your own wisdom, then your ancestors’ teachings remain

distant and out of reach. *Tall Men, Long Lives* surprises the reader above all with how amiably an attitude and a sincere questioner can exist side by side. If the reader can answer attitude with the same, then the broken soul searching for answers will cast her weapons aside and empathetically burrow into Teede’s poetry.

BERK VAHER
SILMANURGA TAGA
 (BEHIND THE CORNER OF THE EYE)

Elusamus 2018, 56 pp.
 ISBN 9789949884346

The title *Silmanurga taga* (*Behind the Corner of the Eye*) is undoubtedly the first thing that nags at the reader when becoming acquainted with Berk Vaher’s latest poetry collection. As familiarity grows, its power to explain the poems arranged behind it is gradually revealed. Glimpsing something out of the corner of your eye means to hazily see what is happening on the fringes of your vision. Someone peering out from behind a corner wishes to catch a glimpse of something but is – for some reason – too scared to fulfill that desire at the cost of emerging.



When someone hiding behind a corner speaks, the result is “round-the-corner”, or indirect speech (ümbernurgajutt); winding riddles that avoid saying anything directly. Lastly, on occasion, one can notice a tear treacherously glinting in the corner of an eye.

The main trepidation of *Behind the Corner of the Eye* is that when we externalize our inner world into a form of the visible world, such as by putting it into words, then its substance is altered beyond recognition. The flowing, multicolored, restless, and multiplicitous ego-ness – a flourishing scrub of selves (p 16) – is unable to find a worthily complex or flexible-enough existential opportunity. Thus, cast from his inner world, he leaps instead into a cynical world of style worn cliché-thin – one where focus is impossible – and as this understanding deepens, he becomes mired in bitter-ish self-irony. The ordinary power relationship between the word and its speaker is flipped: the words get ahead of the person and are too quick and false (p 48). When the writer asks “who am I to say” (p 53), the question’s usual rhetorical emphasis has shifted: it is

not a polite retraction of the self, but rather a decision to embark into a frightening state of loss.

Vaher’s poems pant: the many mid-line breaks, pauses, spaces, unexpected transitions, and abandoned words indicate chaotic rhythm and a state of struggle. Pauses occasionally break up the lines of poetry into pieces so self-standing that they pull one’s gaze towards words in the upper or lower line rather than to their own. One can sense that, in doing so, the author is offering an alternative way of reading in order to somehow find space to breathe in the literary suit of armor.

Behind the Corner of the Eye comes off as cryptic and difficult to grasp, requiring consideration from several different angles to see around the corner of the desperate tone. Nevertheless, from the very first reading, it is clear that Vaher’s goal is not to torment readers or boast his textual might, but rather to guide them away from excessive simplicities, constricting specificity, and a stagnant perception of the world. **MHM**

OLLE LAULI

KURISTIK

(THE ABYSS)

Tallinn, Gallus, 2018. 439 pp

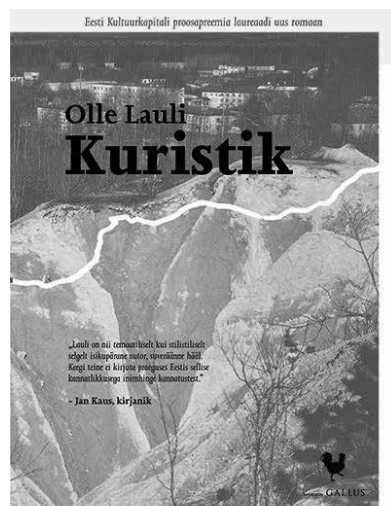
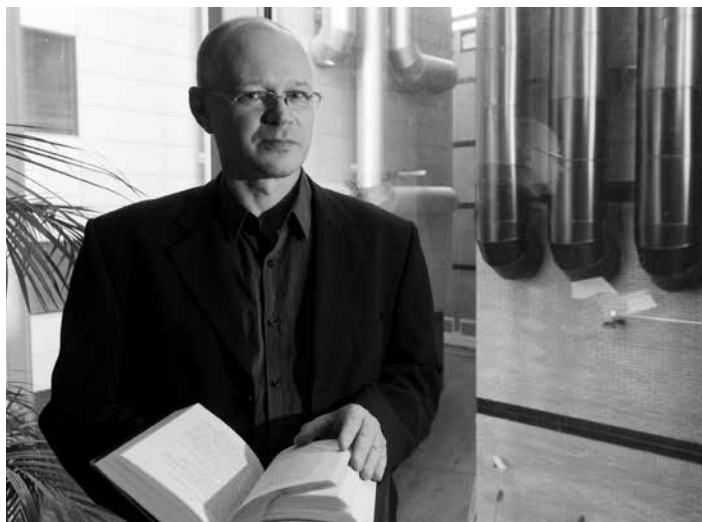
ISBN 9789949720637

Olle Lauli, writing under a pseudonym, is inarguably a stand-out phenomenon in Estonian literature. He publishes infrequently (three novels over a period of eleven years), but the release of any new work he pens has turned into a noteworthy literary affair. Lauli's writing speaks for itself and the author tends to keep a safe distance from the public sphere. His latest novel *The Abyss* continues along this same path.

Lauli's works characteristically possess a limitless sense for nuance and the scrupulous reflection of everyday psychopathologists. Jan Kaus has called his approach "Dostoyevsky-like", which is credible indeed; Lauli has a sweeping talent for painting portraits. *The Abyss* takes this to the next level: whereas his debut novel *The Disciples of St. Nicholas* and the subsequent *Homelessness* primarily focus upon a single character in that person's present day, this latest work takes a long-awaited step further, knowing no national boundaries and

even whisking the reader a century back in time. Condensed in the copious assemblage of characters is the truth that human life "is generally always one in the same, no matter the regime" (p 307). All the souls Lauli dissects are commonly "on the edge" and he lends a voice to those who otherwise receive very little attention in public discourse. Those for whom the Soviet Union's collapse was not a triumph, but rather came as a shock and do not feel at home in the capitalist sprint that has ensued. They are people often overlooked by the Estonian state and Estonian society to this day. The cultural fissures between ethnic Estonians and Russians is a theme that pervades Lauli's works; and in *The Abyss*, he reveals the source of many post-Soviet societal problems.

Nevertheless, society merely serves as a background here; as a necessary context for understanding the individual. Lauli shows empathy for characters who seek a better life abroad. Seeking something better is intrinsic to us as a species, and the stories of ethnic Estonians and Russians who emigrated to the West in the thousands once the borders opened are simply the consequent examples of it. For Lauli, society



itself is the crisis driving emigration and the homelessness it may bring. The lines between states and nations haven't disappeared: one simply seeks a place where they are less painful. In Lauli's novels, society is a problem that breaks his characters, more often than not. In order to arrive at the peace of enlightenment, one must first see through the absurdity of that abyss.

Lauli has risen to the foreground of contemporary Estonian literature by virtue of his unique narrative gaze and style, one strength of which is certainly his talent for penning genuine dialogues. At a time when the threshold of man's attention span is contracting exponentially it is a joy to encounter a novel of classic breadth. **OB**

MARIA LEE LIIVAK (b. 1984) studied dramaturgy and print technology. Her everyday activities involve reading, writing, shaping, and printing all kinds of different textual materials.

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

MAARJA HELENA MERISTE (b. 1992) is a literary critic, editor, and is pursuing a master's in literature at the University of Tartu. In 2017, Meriste received the youth literary magazine *Värske Rõhk*'s annual award for literary review.

OLIVER BERG (b. 1990) graduated from the University of Tartu in literary studies. He has contributed literary reviews, short stories, and poetry to several Estonian magazines. His debut novel *Brother's Love* (*"Venna arm"*) was published in 2017 and was nominated for the Betti Alver Award for Best Debut.

2/2018

Art

The Baltic Issue

Inga Lāce
Diana Tamane
Auguste Petre
Merike Estna
Sandra Jõgeva
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Mai Levin
Antti Tapi
Anna Est
Keiu Kri
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Marg
Ann
Ka
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E
Pee
Kati
Saara
Elisa-Joh



Eesti Instituut

in the clear winter night there's
one window still light,
behind it
a grown man curses his
slow computer.
that man is me.

AARE PILV

TRANSLATED BY ADAM CULLEN