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# Places of writing

*by Tiit Aleksejev*

Places of writing can be divided into two: those where writing is possible in general, and those that have a direct connection to the subject matter and should be encountered firsthand. For the contemporary author, the opportunity to focus in an agreeable spatial locale, even if it is one's home library, is more of a luxury

The concert hall is one of the most ideal of writing places. Music inherently possesses the virtue of organizing one's thoughts, but when you listen to a perfectly-composed piece, then plot lines of a written work can evolve unexpectedly. Oftentimes, they don't even need to be written down – they crystallize in your memory all on their own. And unlike in the case of word-based performances, it's possible to simply go along with average or even bad music, dismissing it to mere background noise.

Moving on to specific places, Damascus is undoubtedly one site of exceptional significance. I went there in the spring of 2011, when gunfire was already being exchanged in the suburbs and foreigners had evacuated or were in the process of doing so. It gave the “Venice of the Mediterranean” a very unusual undertone. But no less important was the fact that I discovered in Damascus

the ancient Antioch, which I had been attempting, unsuccessfully, to recreate for quite a long time already. Standing before my eyes were the respective descriptions of Hermann Broch and the Estonian writer Leo Metsar, to which not much could be added. Nothing at all, in fact. The Antioch of the Normans was dead and had been paved over by order of Atatürk: neither the chronicles nor pilgrims' accounts could help. Arriving in Damascus, it was obvious the city was filled with early-medieval buildings. What's more, a unique trait of Middle Eastern cities is that if warfare has not wrought utter destruction, then buildings are reconstructed according to their original floor plans. Cities in the region resemble plants that may be cut or uprooted but will more or less sprout identical to the way they once were.

Exploring Damascus, I realized that the city's historical aspect is not principal; that the pith of the urban space is found within something else. It's the medley of evening light, the unexpectedly cool and moist breeze that arrives at sunset and eddies along the cobblestone streets, the scent of dust and spices, the calls to evening and morning prayers. The faded facades, and the tidy inner courtyards. Suspended above



TIIT ALEKSEJEV · ARCHIVE PHOTO

it all was some kind of tension or disquiet. As one local silver merchant explained in a bazaar: “There is war in the air, I feel it...” He wasn’t mistaken: a couple weeks later, intense gunfire broke out. One of those notebooks lying around in a drawer somewhere right now is filled with my sketches and impressions. And later, I used it all to write medieval Antioch, my personal interpretation.

Something similar happened in Kiev in early March 2014: the “revolution”, as it was called at the time, had concluded and Maidan was still smoking. The city had returned to its ordinary rhythm, but the unease of war could still be felt in the air. Estonia’s embassy was pleasantly calm compared with other analogous institutions. An important part in this might have been played by the ambassador himself,

who realized that the “green men” might not make it any farther than Donetsk, that Ukrainians would resist, and that Ukraine itself had enough strategic depth to not be overrun in a couple of weeks. I’d recently begun writing a play titled *The Year of Wonders*, one character of which is a former soldier of the Estonian Narva Battalion who fought in Ukraine in 1943. In order to understand that man (or, rather, that boy), I’d been reading historical wartime texts and later memoirs. As a result, this became a kind of backdrop to Ukraine in 2014. Winding through much of the writing was the Dnieper, the breadth of which had astounded Estonians fighting in early-20<sup>th</sup>-century Ukraine. And when I personally became acquainted with the waterway, I realized it truly is immense; something much more than a river in the Estonian understanding. In one weekend, I penned the majority of the play in the President Hotel lobby bar in Kiev, and to this day, I am deeply grateful to the waitresses who politely cleared away my empty coffee mugs and served me lunch- and dinnertime pelmeni. The Dnieper made it into the play. For one dialogue, the director Madis Kalmet had the male and female protagonists stand at opposite ends of the stage, and the breadth of the river became the distance separating the two; a symbol of the impossibility of their love.

It’s possible that what differentiates ideal places of writing from ordinary ones is some kind of an understanding or recognition, through which one can accomplish several weeks’ work over the period of just a couple of hours or even a couple of minutes. The National Library of Latvia in Riga was one such encounter for me. I visited to view an exhibition about Martin Luther

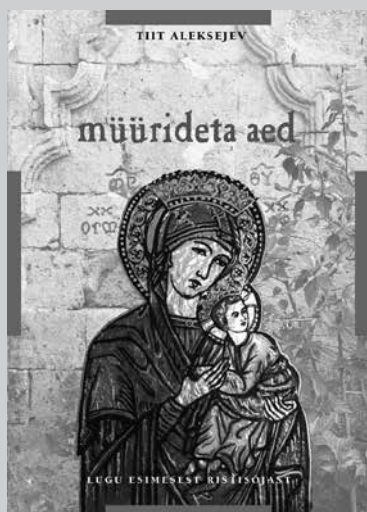
and translations of the Bible. At the time, I was writing a short story about Adrian Virginius, who co-authored the first translation of the Bible into South Estonian. The exhibition was very well-organized and educational, but didn’t leave a deep impression. In an adjoining hall, I discovered another exhibition on early manuscripts. Projected onto a wall were letters that sometimes grouped together, only to break apart again. They crumbled, to be exact. I reckoned that Virginius, ever seeking the perfect translation, might have had a similar vision in the moment before his execution. I went somewhere – I don’t remember if it was the library café or simply the foyer – and wrote that scene of the story. In retrospect, a place I cannot even recall was one of the best places of writing I’ve experienced.

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# Hortus Conclusus

by Tiit Aleksejev · Excerpt translated by Adam Cullen



Hortus Conclusus by Tiit Aleksejev  
Varrak, 2019

We attack from three sides at once. From the south where the moat is now the shallowest and it's possible to nudge the siege tower up to the walls; from the north, ramming the city gates; and from the east with scaling ladders. Saint Anne's Army is divided into two: half push the tower forward under Léon's command and cover it from the sides while the other half, led by Sergius, attacks the city gates with the Provençal soldiers and storms the most difficult sections of the wall. I myself am in the tower. It consists of three parts and has been built taller than the walls so the defending soldiers have as little chance as possible to shield themselves from the death raining down from above. Standing by my side on the platform are the finest knights we have, Lord Charles and Tancred of Apulia among them. These men care neither for angels nor ordeals; they possess brute force and the ability to direct it.

My own strength is at an end, my fever blazing even more intensely than before, I see everything through a gray fog within which swirl the steam of breaths, ice crystals, and flecks of ash, and just moments from now the eddy will be joined by the souls of the pilgrims to lift heavenwards with the haze, currently they lie between two worlds and from below, from the ground, come

the sounds of cursing, gasping, and rallying cries, the Tafurs push the contraption upon wooden wheels, citadel against citadel, force against force, soon it will be made clear which will triumph, that of Satan or of the Lord, at long last we have set the stronghold into motion. The tower sways perilously, holding too many men too densely, each man knows what to expect from the walls, no one wishes to stand in the front row, the archers squirm their way towards the rear, but the knights shove them back up against the balustrades, at the center of the platform are the drummers and flutists meant to strike terror into the defenders but who deafen us instead, drums beaten fervently as if the cloth-bundled clubs were pummeling infidels and not tautened hides, that hide is my skin, I think, my heart, the rasping emanating from my chest, the flutists blow, Lord Charles bellows at the top of his lungs, many are roaring and howling, we are a herd brought to the slaughter, arrows whiz towards us and black birds wheel above the arrows, we are their feast, flesh for butchering and devouring, we still have names and titles but we are flesh.

Jerk by jerk we draw nearer to the walls, from our vantage we can see Comestor's Tafurs storming the moat, raising the ladders, stones and logs showering down upon them, they are all clad in identical rags, a homogenous grayish wave, the roars, howls, and screams of the wounded sound from their direction as well, ladders snap, they fall, the infidels shriek in return, we speak the very same language, look! Tancred roars, shaking me by the shoulder, Sergius' men have set up the battering ram, the first blows strike the gates, something silken streams out from beneath the walls, they are rats fleeing the city, it is a good sign, we now tower above the waves, I

should feel anxious, my blood sounding the alarm, but I feel something else. Rather, I see it. Maria is here. I haven't seen her the entire siege, but now she is here, next to me, before me, above me, everywhere, go away, I think, get out of here! go! Lord Charles blows the horn, his cheeks puffing absurdly, but instead of a resounding signal it emits a mere whimper, the death gurgle of a swine, it's lurching, sard! a plump knight growls, don't sway it! he roars downward, craning over the edge, this tower's a shit carving! an arrow cracks into the beam where his throat just was, bowing before the commoners, the iron splits the wood, Lord Charles turns and stares at it in astonishment, then smirks, raises the horn to his lips, and this time blows a victorious metallic blast, one in praise of survival, he laughs uproariously, he has risen from the dead, it is a celebration of joy, I laugh along with him, though not out of joy but apprehension, apprehension is in the air, it passes along through the fighters, infectious, stronger than courage and cowardice, stronger than the grief within me, stronger than the black wings, my heart pounds, the drum pounds, Maria dissipates into the cloud of steaming breath, praise be to Christ, *te Deum laudamus!* the tower shudders and groans in praise of the Lord, it crawls forward a jerk at a time, the men howl with laughter and piss themselves as they do, good thing it's the top floor, Lord Tancred snickers beside me, that was the right choice! right, I think, of course it's right, all that is higher are winged, spinning cherubs and seraphs who roar in turn: holy! holy! holy! Flames break out on the walls, an arrow has struck a torchbearer or he himself has erred, has struck himself, the Tafurs are pushing the tower straight into the fire, hold! Tancred cries down, hold! but our momentum is

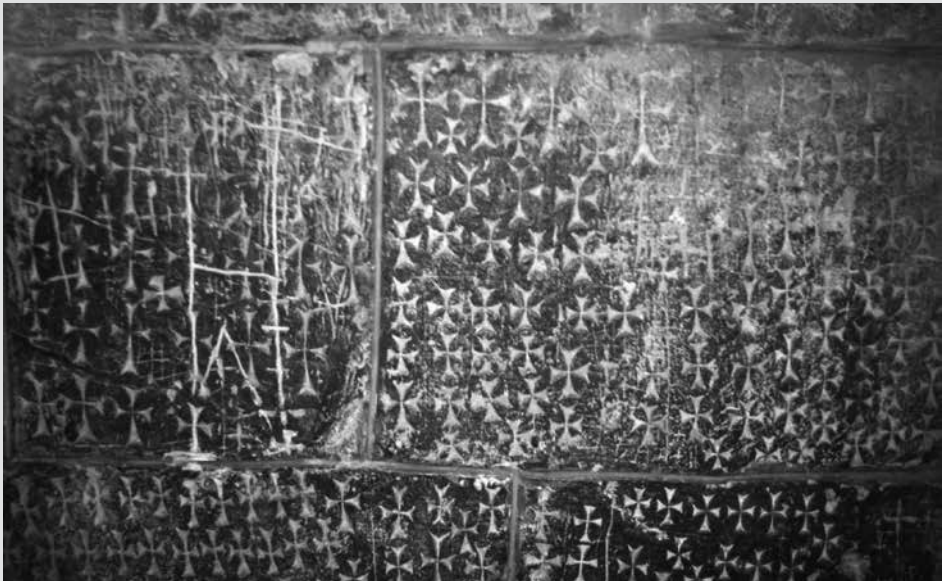


impossible to halt, down below the ram bashes the city gates with steady booms, the gates flex, buckle inward, then rebound, they'll never break, I think, we've got to do the whole job ourselves again, a moment later the tower thuds against stone, we've landed, we're here. Off! Lord Charles cries, toots the horn once more and tenses to leap into the flames, I wrench him back, the Geneva archers release a volley of arrows, a fissure forms in the thorny wall greeting us, the spearmen fall onto one knee, their comrades attempt to enter the gap, this is our moment, Tancred the Norman and I look at one another, we nod and hurl ourselves forth together.

+

We fought for an entire day, the infidels resisting like demons. Only later, plundering the bodies, did we realize that soldiers equipped like knights had been sheltering

in Ma'arra; it was possible that all secondary fighters had been dispatched to defend some other city. The Ma'arra garrison had had every advantage over us: better weapons, strong walls, even Greek fire. Yet we had something they did not. God's protection, priests would say. Providence... They do know better, but soldiers are aware there is no protection that comes of its own accord. One must give it his all and must earn such protection. I've wondered: what if God was awoken by the desecration committed by my orders? Those corpses, which were dragged to the bonfires as the defenders of Ma'arra looked on in horror. What if God opened His eyes and realized that we truly are prepared to go to the final limits in His name? That we have completed the trial? Yet sometimes as I lie sleepless in my monastery cell at a dark hour, I've wondered: what if God does not *wish* to see? And if those who are undaunted by anything will triumph? But the very next moment, I've dispelled the thought.



PILGRIMS' GRAVES AT THE CHURCH OF THE HOLY SEPULCHRE  
IN JERUSALEM · PHOTO BY TIIT ALEKSEJEV

# Warmth and perturbation

## An interview with Eda Ahi

by ELM

Eda Ahi is a poet whose sharp words, impeccable sense of rhythm, and rich imagery has captivated readers since her very first collection. *Masquerade* (2012) can be counted as one of the strongest Estonian literary debuts of the last decade: the young author's poems were at times shockingly mature, and her distinctive literary voice was already clear. Rhyming adds an ambrosial quality to Ahi's poems – a technique to which she has remained loyal to this day. *Masquerade* also received the Betti Alver Debut Award. Since then, Ahi has released five poetry collections altogether, each of which has received acclaim. Her latest work, *War and Perturbation* (2018), ripened over the course of working as an Estonian foreign servant in war-torn Ukraine for one year and was recently nominated for the 2018 Cultural Endowment of Estonia's Award for Literature.

**Let's start from the beginning. Your first poems were published when you were 18. How did you start writing poetry? Have you always known that literature is your calling or your “high road”, so to say?**

I started writing when I was a kid. Like most of us, that stage of my life was very da Vinci-like. I had a very broad field of work and play that stretched from engineering and agronomy to all kinds of fine arts. I enjoyed drawing the most, but wasn't a stranger to musical improvisation or writing, either. That kept up at least until the end of the first grade. Later, my life turned somewhat gloomier and more monotonous. I came back to writing poetry by the time I was a blossoming teenager. At the age of 13 or 14, I discovered that I liked to write.

I've always held a very liberal attitude towards utilizing skills and talents and believing one can successfully learn and do all kinds of things in life while still remaining happy and even emotionally healthy, to a relative degree. Even so, practical experience has shown that although you really can learn all kinds of different things and even be engrossed by them for a while, some fields still suit better than others.

When I was younger, “follow your calling” sounded kind of distant and unrealistic to me; it was overly romantic. But now, a calling seems to be something extremely simple and even practical. An inner faculty to do what suits you, which is to say, something that draws you to it and you're good at, more or less.





**You did continue writing. And to this day, you write rhyming poems almost without exception. How did that choice come about? How much of it was chance, and how much was intention?**

Writing in rhyme was a complete coincidence. I tried to write more free-verse poetry at some point, but it was an incredible flop. I suppose you have to be a more talented poet and editor of your own poems to write well in free verse – and no doubt also more whole as a person to be able to find your clear path in a state of apparent disorder. By now, I can probably say that I've made peace with myself, and in doing so have made peace with the conscious choice to write based on gut feeling: just as cognitively as suits me best and seems the most logical. At the moment, this means writing in a more definite rhythmical structure and in rhyme, though I suppose my rhyming is lazier than before. I'm not saying I'll never give free verse another try, but the

way I see it, it could come organically. Not like: mmm, now, I'm going to force myself to write a different way. I suppose that as a process, playfulness and adventure is important to me when writing poetry: you should always be excited about what will turn out. The idea of being compelled to try to write free verse is intriguing. When writing, I like to see where language takes me all on its own, and in that sense, rhyme might not be restricting or confining in the very least, but rather (at least based on my limited experience) even *liberating* from free verse on occasion.

**Is there a magician within you, and how much so? Are you a seeker and reader of signs?**

I reckon I haven't been given the magician's gene at all. As for signs, I'm most interested in connections and the elation that comes with you discover them. It's always fantastic when something reminds you of the wholeness of the world and of existence; of



ONCE UPON A WORKING DAY IN KIEV · ARCHIVE PHOTO

the greater context of the age you live in. Traveling is a relatively foolproof way to experience this, for instance.

**You really have traveled a lot, and you've also written about it. Recently, you spent a year working in Ukraine, which also led to your latest poetry collection *War and Perturbation*. Does this latest collection differ from your earlier works, and how significantly?**

Perhaps the experience I describe in the collection is more clearly delineated than before: temporally, spatially, and in terms of topics. Most of the poems were indeed written over the period of a single year in one specific country; others were written while thinking about the year, either preparing for it or later recapitulating what I experienced. I wouldn't say it's entirely true, but I suspect the book turned out to be even more direct and personal than my earlier ones: the "perturbation" in the title is also a sarcastic reference to my own anxiety.

**What's the broader state of art and literature in Ukraine right now?**

I have to admit I was actually very surprised to see how vigorously the art scene can flourish in spite of war and destruction: or, rather, how it can seem to sprout straight up through the rubble. I guess deep down, I'd foolishly supposed that if not the artists, then at least the audience wouldn't have the interest or time to turn towards art in such a situation. But there on the ground, it turned out to be the exact opposite. I was amazed to see that authors enjoyed a status akin to rock stars: and not just living writers, by the way, but even long-dead ones of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Lately, I had the honor and pleasure to interview the Ukrainian poet Liubov Yakymchuk, who confirmed my impression that literary events are even more popular in the current tense era than they were before. People trust writers and literature and seek answers in their works that politicians often

aren't able to provide. She said that even in small places around Ukraine's periphery, hundreds of active and genuinely interested people will gather at poetry evenings.

**War is, of course, a terribly dear price to pay for people to start perceiving the value and might of literature.**

True. I feel like in modern-day Estonia, we generally don't perceive literature, and especially poetry, as a practical or crucial phenomenon. "Practical" isn't the first word that comes to mind when describing it, at least, nor does it have to be. It appears to be different in Ukraine and reminds you what kind of weight and importance literature and reading can have. So, even when you live in relatively safe places, it's worth keeping a couple of books within reach, just in case. All in all, it's positive that we have the opportunity to treat literature as a luxury that we can all afford ourselves, not a staple good.

**You mentioned earlier that you also have a lot of bright memories of Ukraine that didn't make it into the book.**

Speaking in general, maybe the greatest positive tone I encountered in that country and its people was a burgeoning life force in the face of chaos and resignation; an urge to make art and the determined desire to build something new. The sometimes youthful, bold, and sincere belief that everything is possible and still lies ahead. Ukraine's diversity, its fascinating and complex history, its culture and colorfulness. The fast pace and open-minded metropolitanism of Kiev, as well as the opportunity to travel throughout Ukraine and the nearby vicinity. Of course, the

whole journey probably would've had a much paler hue if I hadn't had wonderful travel companions.

**You've also lived in Italy, where you renovated a house, among other things. How did life lead you there?**

I ended up in Italy as part of my studies. Specifically, after finishing secondary school, I made the adventurous and, even to me, unexpected decision to go study Romance culture, and specifically Italian. To this day, I believe it's one of the best decisions I've made in my adult life.

I spent one academic year as an Erasmus student in Florence, then headed to Sicily for the summer months, where I volunteered. Thus, I was able to experience two different Italies: the country people usually associate with a ton of simplifying stereotypes is actually immensely diverse. The realization is certainly cliché, but directly experiencing how stereotypes don't hold true is refreshing from time to time. From a growth standpoint, this was extremely important for someone living in a country they knew only from a university study program and other peoples' stories. Shenanigans and escapades were all a part of it, of course, as was self-discovery.

**After spending long periods away, have you started to see life in Estonia in a new light, too?**

I'm very grateful for both years of my life spent abroad: life was exciting in both Italy and Ukraine. Still, I like living in Estonia, even though I'm occasionally brought down by the divisions, cruelty, and lack of consideration that erode society. In spite



KIEV BEHAVING FOGGILY · ARCHIVE PHOTO

of sometimes disappointing missteps, however, it does seem like we're gradually moving in the right direction. The year in Ukraine reminded me that we tend to take a lot of blessings for granted. Things have worked out pretty well for Estonians, although I suppose we've had to work a good deal to make them work out, too. I remember that even when I was returning from Italy with a fresh gaze, life in Estonia seemed rather positive: dynamic and open to the future. However, we Estonians could certainly learn a thing or two from Italians, as well as Ukrainians. For the first time in a long while, I haven't felt a need to move somewhere for a longer period, which no doubt has to do with the current stage of my life. I'd still like to travel, of course: frequently and far away.

**You're increasingly involved in translating, too. And one could say you have several native languages. What fascinates you most about translating?**

I grew up in a multilingual environment: we speak Estonian, Russian, and sign language in my family. I only speak the latter on a

very basic level, unfortunately, because my parents spoke to me mainly in Estonian and Russian and in sign language among themselves. No doubt I got my interest in languages and the translating bug it brings with it when I was just a kid, unawares. English was added to the mix in primary school and I later studied French and Spanish to a lesser degree, also. I focused on Italian culture in university and the language came as a bonus. I did pick up a teensy bit of Ukrainian while living there. All in all, I feel more or less fluent in English, Russian, and Italian; the others still need practice.

Right now, my main translating dream is simply translating itself: finding opportunities to translate high-quality literature (meaning prose and poetry) and writing that is familiar and important to me as well as that which I still don't know; which surprises me.

**So, Eda Ahi is a poet and a translator who, at the moment, also works as an official at the Estonian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Do you dream of someday dedicating yourself entirely**



EDA AHI · PHOTO BY PIIA RUBER

**to literature, regardless? Or do those worlds balance one another other out?**

Yes and no. I've generally held an optimistic attitude towards uniting my employment activities with literature, believing that diversity is enriching. However, this type of joining certainly shouldn't be an obligation, but simply a choice. Hopefully, the opinion that struggle is a direct path to high literary quality isn't all that widespread anymore. If you know how to maintain a true balance

between those worlds and wish to do so, then that balance can definitely turn out to be highly productive. On the other hand, if at some point you're no longer able to or don't want to anymore, then the situation can turn pretty dire.

My day job has been quite interesting and usually accompanied by a very positive and supportive work environment, but it's also required a relatively large amount of time and dedication, even at the expense of literature and my private life. However,



I doubt I'd have been able to write my latest poetry collection without my day job. I'd be lying, though, if I claimed that everything has gone swimmingly: from time to time, I can't help but notice that evenings spent on literature are few and far between because of work.

**What do you read, mostly? And what else do you enjoy doing in your free time?**

I read mostly Estonian-language literature with another language or two mixed in. On my nightstand right now, for example, are short stories by the French writer Annie Saumont as well as Veronika Kivisilla's and Kristjan Haljak's new books. Traveling also opens up fresh horizons for a lazybones like me, who otherwise doesn't search for ever-newer reading landscapes all that actively. I try to read fiction and nonfiction connected to my travel destinations before, during, and after trips, and often pack a few of the books with me. I don't really do anything all that original in my free time: in addition to mind-energizing activities like literature, visual arts, theater, cinema, and music, I sometimes seek bodily stimulation. I go running, for example.

**What was the last song you couldn't get out of your head?**

Lately, I've been haunted by David Bowie's "Kooks".

**If it's okay with you, I'd like to end with something rather personal, inspired by the references that can be intuited from several of your poems. What is your relationship to religion? In what power do you believe?**

I have to admit I'm a little defiant when it comes to religious institutions. That being said, I do naïvely believe in this and that. The first words that come to mind are that I believe it's worth fighting for what you care for and what you believe is important. At the same time, that doesn't always apply: it might not pay to fight for something unnatural. For instance, I believe it's unacceptable and unnatural to be human and to revile or vilify others because of their skin color, gender, nationality, or sexual orientation. It's unfortunate in the first place that even today, I still need to point out something so natural. I'm uncompromising in that matter. So, I suppose above all, I believe in the power of humanity.

Lately, there's been a poem by Doris Kareva spinning around my head which I think best expresses this belief:

You are no better than anyone.  
You are no worse than anyone.  
You have been given the world.

Look what there is to see.

Nurture what is around you,  
nurture who is beside you.  
All creatures in their own way

are funny.

All are fragile.<sup>1</sup>

If that isn't clearheaded reasoning, then what is?

1 Kareva, Doris. *Days of Grace*. Translated by Miriam McIlfatrick-Ksenofontov. Bloodaxe Books, 2018. p. 40

# Poetry by Eda Ahi

## From *War and Perturbation*

*Translated by Adam Cullen*



*War and Perturbation by Eda Ahi*  
*Verb, 2018*

### Obolon

Obolon's raspberries.  
the full summer  
that enveloped us has been caught in a box.  
amid gray balconies and dis-  
interest there was no time to  
see where deep summer streamed to.

babel slips spryly amid towers  
and manipulates its multi-tongued mouth.

amid towers amid blobs  
amid the city's pre-september gray  
Boreas is already unbridled.

his notorious howls are in my head  
tufts long since set on end  
and snowdrifts will soon line the roads.

## **Winter in the east**

winter breathes through the window once more,  
roofs leak and your nose drips,  
it comes pontificating already:  
what's up, winter, everyone's end is the same:  
strip-stark, cold, and fog-dark.  
some lands aren't covered in a blanket of snow,  
but a bona fide burial shroud.

light draws grooves and water freezes in pipes.  
February stretches like a bitter smirk.

but in the cellar, like winter apples  
(not all that rosy-cheeked),  
people store themselves away  
so they might last till spring.

is anyone else preserving them?

## Yellow leaves

you know your face goes through yellow leaves.  
the leaves are cold and smell of decay.  
but you don't care. it's autumn. all is sure to decay.

the sky is grim and your bundles are packed once more.  
a map of the world lies at your cold feet on the floor.  
though now you are no longer boundlessly free  
to stray where the north wind might lead you.

now, you are just as open as this bay:  
rebel as much as you may, but only within the shore's limits.  
you've nowhere to go or hurry anymore.  
cities and castles crumble.

so what.

the bay remains. and you float in its murky murk as in butter.  
the autumn remains. you walk through its yellow leaves.

they are cold.

they smell of home.

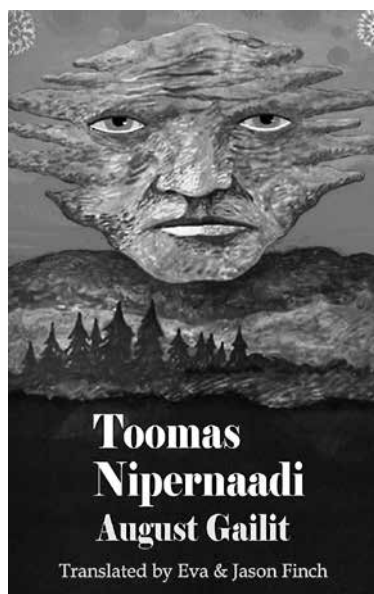


CARPATHIAN COWS IN THEIR NATURAL HABITAT · ARCHIVE PHOTO

# A Brief Guide to Toomas Nipernaadi's Estonia

by Jason Finch

The object of this guide is to supply curious readers, who are possibly also travellers in the country, with some information about the landscape and people of Estonia, in every way aiding them to derive enjoyment and instruction from a tour in this fascinating corner of Europe. The guide is founded on the travels through Estonia during one summer in the mid-1920s of a certain Toomas Nipernaadi, as recorded by August Gailit in his book named after Nipernaadi, first published in Estonian in 1928 and, in 2018, now translated into English for the first time (by Eva Finch and Jason Finch).



*Toomas Nipernaadi* by August Gailit  
Dedalus, 2018.

Actually, that introductory paragraph adapted from Baedeker's *Northern Italy* (1906) might give a misleading impression. *Toomas Nipernaadi*, by August Gailit, is as every Estonian knows not a reliable travel guide but a work of fiction. It contains no map, and its place names are none of them found on a map apart from a few outside the boundaries of Estonia such as Riga and Sweden. It contains lush nature writing attentive to the flora and fauna of different parts of Estonia as the seasons subtly shift one into another. But it combines literary Romanticism with harshly entertaining satire on people and manners. Still, the idea of it as a guidebook to Estonia and Estonians, even if the reader has to fill in the blanks as to region or *maakond*, is a helpful way of seeing it. The book was written on a historical threshold, in the first decade of Estonian independence, and around the time when the country's population began

to be far more of an urban one and less of a rural one than it had ever been in earlier times.

But it is time to begin the tour. First we visit the Black River where the ice is breaking up at the end of winter.

All of the ditches, paths and hollows are full of gurgling rivulets jumping and wiggling like little worms, which rush merrily down the slope, turning into one thing in this charge, expanding and grabbing rotten leaves, twigs and moss and carrying all this on its back to the huge current of the river, a festive ballroom. The snow is brittle and glittery, it collapses in wind and sunshine, it ices over and drops of water tear off the ice crystals as from a dripping beard. The forest is waking from its wintry swaying, the tops of the spruces are getting greener and greener, and the broad boughs of pines are full of glistening droplets of water and birds chirruping. Autumnal sprigs, icy and red, have remained hanging on the naked rowans. Slopes and hills are shedding snow-drifts; brown cranberries and the frozen stems of lingonberries are lifting their heads as if from under a white sheepskin. The air is bluish, full of water and sun. (*Toomas Nipernaadi*, pp. 9–10)

Loki lives here, surrounded by forests. She shares a hut with her grumpy old father, Silver Kudisiim. Perhaps she is seventeen or so, perhaps a bit older. The neighbours are another father-daughter pair, old Habahannes and his daughter Mall. They seem 'snooty and proud' to Loki (p. 19). Much wealthier than she and her father are, they entertain the raftsmen who pass this year every spring as the weather changes, like now when '[t]he nights are warm and

breezy, wetlands steaming and gurgling, waking up from their winter sleep' (p. 13). This year, the raftsmen whizz past without stopping and Loki feels 'unspeakably sorry for herself' (p. 15). Days pass. But then another man arrives on a raft, all alone. He introduces himself to Kudisiim and Loki as Toomas Nipernaadi. Tales and trickery involving both the Habahanneses and the Kudisiims follow, in which it is sometimes hard to tell who the trickster is and who is the one tricked.

Ultimately Toomas flees the region and his journey goes on as spring becomes summer. Six more tales follow. It's a novel in short stories, according to the original title page. Every tale, or chapter, takes Toomas into a new region and a new phase of the year.

Having left Toomas leaping from a boat on the fast-flowing Black River and wading ashore, we meet him next on a 'dusty road' through a landscape which is not the 'immeasurable forests' surrounding Loki but one of lakes leading to a farm set in 'dried-out fields' (pp. 10, 39). Approaching Krootuse farm, we hear about Toomas, 'tall and lean' with 'big eyes [...] full of joy'.

When curious folk asked him something, he laughed with a wide mouth and told them that he was just wandering around looking for how the land really opened up. When he got tired he sat by the roadside, played the zither and sang, but his voice screeched and was ugly. (p. 39)

At Krootuse, the Nōgikikas boys, Peetrus, Paulus and Joonatan, have just lost their mother Liis, by all accounts not a very nice person. Here, not for the last time, Toomas gets involved in a ceremony acting like a

kind of pretend pastor: the funeral of Liis Nõgikikas, where he hands round a bottle of vodka he's found in a cupboard, praising 'the good qualities of the deceased' (p. 44). As everywhere he goes, he becomes rapidly and deeply involved with the people he meets, country people with their own regions and localities who are still always very much country people: sometimes greedy, sometimes hungry for affection but always tied to the specifics of the area where they survive. Toomas comes into and out of their lives, a bit like a Baedeker tourist in the Italy of 1906, a traveller from 'beyond forests and meadows' (p. 44) except that he is in his own country and can always work charms with his speech in the language he shares with the people he meets.

Like Loki and her father, the Nõgikikas brothers are deep in a local rivalry. Theirs is with a pompous neighbouring farmer, Puuslik. Toomas offers help. He suggests they buy the apparatus needed to establish a travelling cinema including – the key thing to attract the crowds – a real live monkey. As he does in most places he goes, he courts a local girl, in this case the fisherman's daughter Miila. As elsewhere, too, mayhem ensues, and Toomas moves on.

Instead of outlining the shenanigans which follow in different parts of Estonia as summer reaches its height then the days start getting shorter again and mellow September gives way to bitter October, this guide will now briefly outline the regions and landscapes visited by Toomas during the rest of this year. After the events at Krootuse farm, he is encountered next in 'an upland area overlooking a valley' where '[b]lue sea could be detected beyond the distant forests' (p. 78). He reaches this

idyllic setting in late April or very early May, perhaps, the trees still 'leafless', '[t]he spring evening [...] full of pollen and the scent of resin'.

By early June, as the longest days of the year are reached, he is in a great wetland, 'the swamps and bogs of Maarla' (p. 105). The nights now are 'momentary, milky pale, blazing hit, full of a toxic fragrance'. The people around Maarla are said to be gypsies and horse thieves. They don't have a good reputation among settled country folk. Here there is a ferry across a river which travellers pay to use. The former ferryman, 'Lionhead' Joona, fell madly in love with a gypsy girl and ended up taking both of them to their deaths over some rapids. Toomas presents himself as 'a fen-drainer by profession' (p. 124). When he applies his professional skills, he says, the area will utterly change. It will become a normal, law-abiding place, with money to be made there. As with the travelling cinema idea so at Maarla, Toomas presents himself to the locals as an incomer from a world of modernity and new technology which is implicitly the world of the town.

From Maarla we move to a Rabelaisian country wedding – where Toomas, briefly, officiates – in the village of Terikeste, on former manorial lands, an upland area of 'clustered hillocks, ridges, wolds and hills with old oak trees, ashes and maples on the tops' reached after 'the Singa lowlands, forests and swamps run out' (p. 175). And then after that Toomas enters another agricultural area where, in the 'mildness' of autumn, 'the air is yellowish, saturated with the scents of earth, the aroma of the ripe grain and hops and the continuous quiet swish of the leaving birds' (p. 241).





PHOTO BY PIIA RUBER

The reader feels shades of change: Gailit is a splendid nature writer. Small alterations within something shared make the atmosphere different. Finally, beside the sea, the rain is becoming sleet then snow. It must be November. Toomas seems destitute, his boots worn out.

In every place there is a story. But as for Toomas's own story, that only gets indicated to the reader at the very end of the book. Everywhere he goes he has been presenting himself as one thing or another: who is he really?

This isn't a guide to August Gailit himself or to his literary circle. As all Estonians know, a road-movie called *Nipernaadi* was seen at the cinema in 1983 and afterwards many times on TV, but that belongs in another article.

*Toomas Nipernaadi* was written and is set at a time when Estonians were still primarily a rural people but when the old rural world was becoming a backward curiosity to the many city-dwellers now among their number. Gailit is more of a comic writer than England's Thomas Hardy, but his portrait of the countryside has elegiac qualities, like Hardy's. He shares with Hardy an intimate knowledge of how country people speak and judge one another. Gailit's nature

descriptions may resemble Wordsworth and Thoreau, but the crazy vigour of the book recalls the trickster tales of African-American and Native-American literature. In Toomas Nipernaadi's Estonia a set of elaborate pranks unfold against a rich landscape, ever-changing but ever-alike.

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All page references are to August Gailit, *Toomas Nipernaadi*, trans. Eva Finch and Jason Finch (Sawtry, UK: Dedalus, 2018). ISBN: print, 9781910213506; e-book, 9781910213902.

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# The 2018 Turku Book Fair: Notes from the organiser

by *Sanna Immanen*

In October of last year, Finland's oldest annual book fair brought together a total of 700 performers, 500 book releases, hundreds of stands, a plethora of publishers, and tens of thousands of literary fans. Visitors had the opportunity to attend panel discussions, browse new books, and meet with authors. Even though the Turku Book Fair is not an "industry fair" in the direct sense, the event is a fantastic opportunity for open-format meetings between individuals involved in literature and culture. Turku itself is an intellectual environment, an academic hub, Finland's historical capital, and host to a vibrant cultural scene similar to those of Uppsala or Tartu.

The 2018 Turku Book Fair celebrated the centenary of Finland's southern neighbor with a rich Estonian-themed program. Visitors to the Estonian stand were able to purchase Estonian books translated into Finnish and expand their knowledge of the country. The children's area of the fair was taken over by Ilon's Wonderland – a children's gallery, museum, and activity center located in Haapsalu, Estonia, which was inspired by the renowned illustrator and Estonian émigré Ilon Wikland.

## **Determined groundwork**

In late 2016, Estonia received a proposal to be the guest of honor at the 2018 Turku Book Fair as part of its centenary celebrations. Estonia's organizing team, which included the Embassy of the Republic of Estonia in Helsinki, the Finnish Representation of the Estonian Institute, and non-profits, which included the Association of Estonian

Societies in Finland and the Tuglas Society in Finland, got right down to work drafting an engaging, wide-ranging, and jam-packed program worthy of the status.

From the very beginning, the most important task facing the team was to encourage Finnish publishers to release new translations of Estonian works for the occasion. Translations are not necessarily a very profitable business these days, of course, but it was clear that building a rich book fair program around equally rich translations would be a very sound approach. Knowing the relaxed tempo of Finnish publishers, we were in quite a rush from day one. We still had to keep Estonia's special status a secret but were able to use this information to exert some gentle influence from the background.

Our first step was to organize an Estonian literary event for Finnish publishers and



translators in early 2017, at which we introduced works for potential translation, the Estonian Literature Center's database, Traducta grant opportunities, and other support measures. We also brought two key groups together – translators and publishers – in order for them to establish useful direct contacts and have one-on-one conversations, something that is difficult to achieve in Finland, as publishers usually negotiate with literary agents when commissioning translated works. Your average Finnish publisher might not be aware that there are no agents on the Estonian book market and copyright talks are usually held directly with the authors themselves. The book fair team thus tried to extend a helping hand to both publishers and translators in the relay race.

The effort was a success: in 2018 alone, a total of eight Estonian works of fiction, one

memoir, four children's books, and one nonfiction work were published as Finnish translations. An array of "new" Estonian authors were introduced to Finnish readers: Kai Aareleid (*Burning Cities*), Andrei Ivanov (*A Handful of Dust*), Indrek Koff (*On the Energy of Estonian Essence*), Kairi Look (*The Airport Bugs Fight On*), Paavo Matsin (*Gogol's Disco*), and Valdur Mikita (*The Art of Listening to Chanterelles*). Such a sizeable and significant portion of Estonian writing published all at once as Finnish translations was the turning of a new page! In addition to the newcomers to Finnish translation, several familiar faces also took the stage at the fair: Kätlin Kaldmaa, Jaak Jõerüüt, Kauksi Ülle, Mika Keränen, and Asko Künnap.

Another interesting aspect of the year was that Finns themselves published 11 books on various Estonian topics including the country's history, ghosts, jokes, military



KÄTLIN KALDMAA (CENTER) · PHOTO BY  
TOMAS DETTENBORN

uniforms, and steamboats. A Finnish novel about the collective-farming era on the Estonian island of Saaremaa was even published. The connection between the two neighbors is very close, indeed.

### A packed program

The program for the Turku Book Fair was drafted in cooperation with the chief organizing team, which included several different creative unions and publishers as well as language teachers, libraries, and museums – a couple dozen organizations in total. Every year, a specific topic is put in the spotlight at the fair. In addition to Estonia's special status, overall environmental awareness, and the painful Finnish Civil War of 1918 were in focus.

Members of the chief organizing team discuss these topics in cooperation and determine the fair's program accordingly. As such, other institutions also organized Estonia-themed panel discussions: as was done by the University of Turku, the Finnish Reading Center, the Finnish Library Association, and the Finnish Association of Translators and Interpreters. The final tally came out to an unprecedented 34 on-stage

discussions; for comparison, in an ordinary year, the fair sees an average of only three to five!

### A thrilling event

The long-awaited weekend finally arrived. Setting the tone for the opening day were 4,000 local teenagers drifting around the expo hall under the supervision of their Finnish-language teachers. Their task was to find answers to a list of literature-themed questions. Young readers visited the Estonian stand to find out how old the Estonian state had turned as well as the titles and authors of the works that were translated into Finnish that year.

Speaker of the Estonian Parliament Eiki Nestor gave an opening speech and was gifted one thousand pine and fir seeds. Since environmental awareness was a central focus of the 2018 fair, visitors were also given seeds in the hopes that new trees would be planted for making future books. The fair's program director, poet and First Lady of the Finnish Republic Jenni Haukio, voiced her hopes that a "park of books" might flourish in Estonia from the seeds given at the event.

## Estonia as every year's guest of honor

Altogether 21,500 people visited the 2018 Turku Book Fair. Appearances by Estonian writers were well-attended and received gushing praise. We can state with pride that the Estonians truly fascinated the Finns! One audience member even proposed making Estonia every year's guest of honor.

I must note that the fair's professional moderators – TV journalists who were able to hold engrossing 20-minute on-stage conversations – were invaluable in provoking public interest during the Estonian-themed discussions. We also invited locally-renowned Finnish writers to chat with their Estonian colleagues: Rosa Liksom spoke with Paavo Matsin about using Russian topics as literary material, Venla Hiidensalo and Kai Aareleid discussed

silenced family stories, and the ethnically Kosovan Finnish author Pajtim Statovci spoke with Andrei Ivanov about societal outsidership.

The Finnish media likewise took an interest in the Estonian writers on hand. In-depth articles were published about many, and the fair received wide media coverage all around Finland. Estonians could be seen on television, heard on radio, and read about in newspapers both locally and nationally. The Turku Book Fair shaped up to be one of the most predominate Estonian centenary events in Finland. Starting with the press release on Estonia's honorary status that was sent out in October 2017, we received media coverage multiple times in cooperation with the expo center's information campaigns and were thus given an invaluable opportunity to speak about literature and Estonia's centenary in general.

The Turku Book Fair's guest of honor is showered in public attention while in the spotlight, but it's also natural that this fades and the situation returns to normal after the event wraps up. Nevertheless, it appears that the focus Estonia enjoyed during the fair is showing no signs of decline. Finnish publishers are demonstrating an ever-deeper trust in Estonian literature. Last year, translation contracts were signed for six Estonian works of both fiction and non-fiction that will be published this year. No doubt more will be added to the list.

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**SANNA IMMANEN** is a translator and the director of the Estonian Institute's branch in Finland. She also raises fine woolly sheep.

ESTONIAN CHILDREN'S WRITER KAIRI LOOK



WRITER AND SEMIOTICIAN VALDUR MIKITA  
PHOTOS BY TOMAS DETTENBORN



# Translator Danutė Giraitė: work = hobby = lifestyle

by Pille-Riin Larm

Danutė Sirijos Giraitė has been translating Estonian literature into Lithuanian for over 40 years, with a list of titles that spans prose, poetry, and plays. The incredibly dedicated translator has, unsurprisingly, received several awards for her work over the decades. In an interview with *ELM*, Giraitė discussed what has kept her tied to Estonian literature for so long and how her translations have been received in Lithuania.

## **How did you arrive at Estonian literature and come to translate it?**

My grandfather Liudas Gira, a poet, was the chairman of the Lithuanian Writers' Union between the world wars and forged ties with Estonian authors. My father Vytautas Sirijos Gira, who was also a writer, had many literary friends and acquaintances in Estonia, so the fascination is almost in my genes. There were several Estonian-language books in my childhood home, but my fondest connection to the nation was a collection of poetry by Marie Under with a dedication to my father. He would allow me to look at that wonder in an indecipherable language as if it were his greatest treasure, but only under the condition that I washed my hands first. He also showed me the poetess's portrait painted by Ants Laikmaa in a book of Estonian art. As such, my earliest impressions of Estonia are associated with the sunny Marie Under.

We were often visited by Aili Erleman, the first translator of Lithuanian prose classics

into Estonian, in addition to a fair number of other Estonian writers. My father corresponded with the Estonian authors Betti Alver, Lilli Promet, and Agnes Kerge. He'd made their acquaintance when he was just a young poet participating in joint Estonian and Lithuanian literary events in the 1930s. Dad corresponded with the Estonian poet and critic Aleksis Rannit until the latter's death and proudly sent him (a researcher at Yale University at the time) my first translated work, which was Eduard Bornhöhe's *Historical Stories* (1978). Rannit, who was fluent in Lithuanian, even praised it, though probably more out of politeness.

All these circumstances led to me developing an interest in the Estonian language, so I enrolled in the University of Tartu. I knew only a few words of Estonian, as a result of which I initially had to register in the Russian language department. At the time, there were no curricula for the likes of me. Nowadays, there are exchange programs and students can study Estonian language at the University of Vilnius. As Professor

Ariste remarked during an Estonian-language lecture at the time: “Pick out and write down what you hear.” I wrote a single long sentence, unable to tell where one word ended or the next began or what they all meant. It was a tricky start.

**Last year was especially fruitful for you as a translator of Estonian literature, with a total of four books being published in Lithuanian: volumes II and III of A. H. Tammsaare’s *Truth and Justice* pentalogy, Rein Raud’s *The Reconstruction*, and Ilmar Taska’s *Pobeda 1946*. What’s the secret of such an outstanding year in terms of creative work?**

I personally can’t say. I’d actually already translated Rein Raud’s *The Reconstruction* in 2016. It took me two years to translate volume II of *Truth and Justice*, but both books were published simultaneously last year. It was simply coincidence or fate: sooner or later, every stubborn translator must earn a Cultural Endowment roly-poly<sup>1</sup> in life; there’s no avoiding it.

**How have the novels been received in Lithuania?**

Reception has been good, given the publishers’ (small publishing houses’) limited advertising capabilities. Each book received

multiple glowing reviews and, as always with Estonian books in Lithuanian translation, they were selected as some of the best translated works of that year. Everybody wanted a piece of Ilmar Taska at the Vilnius Book Fair. Multiple interviews were published, primarily in Lithuanian newspapers and magazines; the author appeared on radio and at several events during the book fair, as well as at the translation’s release at the Estonian Embassy in Vilnius. Estonian literature has its niche in Lithuania. There aren’t as many readers as I’d like there to be, unfortunately, but I suppose one sincere reader is better than ten static ones. I’m reminded of a particularly moving moment: a young man who is a big *Truth and Justice* fan showed up at the publishing house the very next morning after volume III was released. Not old, but young, meaning even Lithuanian youth are interested in the Estonian classics.

**You were also the one who translated volume I of Tammsaare’s *Truth and Justice* into Lithuanian (2009). The same work was finally also published in English last year by Vagabond Voices, and Tanel Toom (who is similarly a young man) made a feature film based on the novel. *Truth and Justice* is undoubtedly a core element of Estonian culture, but do foreigners understand it, and how?**

Speaking about my translation of *Truth and Justice Vol. I*, I’d like to mention that it received an award from PEN International’s Lithuanian chapter: The Translator of the Year Armchair. It was published in 2009 as the 100<sup>th</sup> book of the “World Literature Library” series. Vaga Publishing planned to release the series 25 years before it was

<sup>1</sup> *The Cultural Endowment of Estonia’s Annual Award for Literature, one category of which is dedicated to literature translated from Estonian into a foreign language, consists of a monetary prize and a trophy. The latter is orb-shaped and fondly referred to as a Jonnak, or “roly-poly toy”. The Estonian word jonnakas translates to “stubborn”. – Translator*

finally published, but the project was interrupted by the Singing Revolution and the flurry of changes that followed. I didn't lose hope and kept working on the first volume every now and then. The next volumes' path to print was just as rough because Vaga was unable to continue publishing them and other publishers were afraid the works would be hard to sell.

Of course, the award did draw attention to Estonian literature and Tammsaare's works. I gave a lot of autographs. The literary scholar Leenu Siimiskser wrote a very nice afterword for the Lithuanian translation of *Truth and Justice Vol. I*. However, the greatest praise I received was when people said: "You know, I read the whole book in just one sitting – it's so captivating." I've even received words of thanks from readers I don't know. We, the Lithuanian Tammsaare enthusiasts can't wait for the opportunity to see the film based on volume one of *Truth and Justice*, too.

I don't know how the French and British interpret *Truth and Justice*, but for us, it's like a work of our very own, because the problems and conditions of that era were the exact same in Lithuania. By the way, whenever I press publishers about the next volumes, I always mention that even the French – a people for whom Estonia is distant both geopolitically and in terms of temperament and mentality – have published a translation of the classic.

### **What makes the works of A. H. Tammsaare topical even today?**

In my opinion, Tammsaare's works will remain topical for as long as human-kind exists. The issues of love for one's

homeland, national solidarity, and cultural preservation are especially important and are the key to all of his works. He worded it very concisely in one of his last articles, "Loyalty": "The only right way out for us lies in loyalty to our land, our people, our language, our culture, and our peculiarities. If we lack this faculty for truth, then no one can help us, for we are like a heap of sand granules scattered by a gust of wind, or smoke that dissipates in space."

### **Do you intend to continue translating the *Truth and Justice* pentalogy?**

I do, indeed. I'll be starting on *Truth and Justice Volume IV* soon – you can't just stop halfway.

**It seems like last year's celebrations of the Baltic states' 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of independence have united Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania a little, and this not just in pragmatic decisions, as it might appear from their cooperation as the Market Focus Countries of the London Book Fair last year, or their joint meeting with the US president. They've also developed an interest in one another – at least in Estonia, the translation and popularity of our southern neighbors' literature has livened up. How does it look in Lithuania?**

People have definitely gained an interest, which I can tell by the frequent questions I'm asked, for instance. More is being written about the other countries in the media, and there are more joint events. Unfortunately, interest in literature depends on extremely material factors, i.e. monetary support for publishing and book sales.





DANUTĖ SIRIJOS GIRAITĖ · PHOTO BY DMITRI KOTJUH

It'd be wonderful if both sides that favor the cultural relationship in Lithuania and Estonia were guided by the principle "if you can help, then help", not the opposite. Unfortunately, everything hinges on pragmatic decisions. I can't go without mentioning that the Estonian publisher Penikoorem and I had a nice plan to release a collection of works by ten contemporary Estonian poets in both Estonian and Lithuanian to

mark the countries' respective centenaries. Alas, we were told "no" from every direction with the justification that a Lithuanian-language book should be published in Lithuania, even though the collection is in two languages.

I haven't lost hope yet that I'll find someone genuinely interested in the reciprocal approach to Estonian and Lithuanian

literature that was begun 86 years ago by Friedebert Tuglas and my grandfather.

**Leaving aside the financial aspect, what kinds of difficulties do you encounter most when translating Estonian literature? Are they grammatical, cultural, or something else? Is there anything about Estonian literature and culture that seems exotic to a Lithuanian?**

I suppose the greatest difficulties are in terms of style, as every author has his or her own individual way of writing. When translating *Truth and Justice* and other older works, there are a whole lot of historical, cultural, and grammatical complications. All in all, if you work and toil, then it won't be without difficulties.

Estonian exoticism? Maybe island life and culture, as Lithuania doesn't have a single island. I've spent 25 summers in the Rannametsa fishing village in Southwest Estonia in order to experience the land of my translations' characters amid everyday Estonian life and culture, so I suppose nothing about it is exotic or strange to me anymore. At the release of *Truth and Justice Vol. I*, Professor Petras Bražėnas, a Lithuanian literary critic, expressed his amazement: he'd never have believed that such Spanish-like passions could simmer in a faraway northern village. They emerge firstly in the rivalry of the characters Andres and Pearu, but also in the personalities of Pearu and others.

**You've also translated Finnish and English literature into Lithuanian. Have you had any time to do so lately? What are you working on currently?**

Unfortunately, I don't have time for diversions anymore – may God give me the strength to see *Truth and Justice* to completion! At the moment, I'm finishing up my translation of Jaan Kaplinski's *The Same River* and need to start working on *Truth and Justice Vol. IV*. It appears I'll have Jaan Kross' *Between Three Plagues* to translate, but it's not certain yet. I only translate one work from one language at a time. I try to squeeze myself as empty as possible to be able to embody new characters in a new life. It's in no way easy, even in the case of just one book.

**How do you pick works to translate? Of what Estonian author, or any author in general, are you fondest?**

When choosing new works, I, first of all, sort through the wealth of material that Kerti Tergem of the Estonian Literature Center thoughtfully sends to translators of Estonian literature, or I search for reviews myself. Theaters usually ask for specific drama translations. At least one Estonian play is staged every year in Lithuania, and I used to translate even several at a time for festivals.

There's a whole stack of Estonian books that I haven't had time to submit for consideration or for which I haven't found an interested publisher yet. For example, Mintis Publishers intended to publish my proposed translation of Jaan Kross' *Between Three Plagues* for about a quarter of a century, but only now, after the London Book Fair, has another publisher shown a serious interest. Naturally, it's more enjoyable to translate a book of which you're fond, but it's sometimes easier to translate from a distance: you're able to rely more upon sense than emotions.

The authors I hold in high esteem are all the ones I'm currently reading or translating, ranging from A. H. Tammsaare to younger writers. They're all troublesome in a way, but troublesome things are usually the ones dearest to you. As for literature in general, there are very many authors, but just to name a few: Timo K. Mukka, Aksel Munthe, Julio Cortázar, Iris Murdoch, Arto Paasilinna, Lewis Carroll, Tove Jansson... Oh, I'm afraid there's not enough room in this interview.

**The 2018 Nobel Prize for Literature was cancelled as a result of scandals. Some Estonians have expressed regret because they believe there might have been a greater likelihood than ever before for a Baltic writer to receive it on the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Baltic states' independence. Still, I personally believe that Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania can get Nobel laureates even without their centenaries, because we do in fact have great authors. Whom would you submit as a candidate? Earlier contemporary Estonian nominees have been Doris Kareva, Jaan Kaplinski, and Viivi Luik.**

Although you can't submit deceased writers, it's really too bad that Jaan Kross – who was once nominated for the prize – didn't receive it. He was a flagship of modern Baltic literature as a whole. In my mind, it's still him and only him. I suppose that's the fate of Baltic writers: either they don't have a suitable political background, which is undoubtedly an important factor for winning the Nobel Prize, or they haven't received enough recognition around the world. As for Lithuanian authors, Kristina

Sabaliauskaitė, who has written about the history of the Lithuanian state in an artistically high-caliber tetralogy, is without a doubt worthy of the Nobel Prize for Literature.

I also love and respect every contemporary Estonian candidate. How could I pick just one?

**What are your hobbies? What do you like to do when you're not translating? Though I do suppose you're translating all the time...**

The farther back in time it was when I collected stamps, actors' headshots, old coins, colorful exotic postcards, etc., the fewer things there are that I could call hobbies. Work, hobbies, and lifestyle have become so intermixed that reading books has become work, as well as taking care of my dog and cat – everyday life, theater, films, and hiking are the delicacies of life. Even so, I have just one childhood dream remaining: a good camera and finding enough time for nature photography, which I try to do every free moment I have. And the sea, of course – I'll never get tired of watching it, listening to it, its scent. In short, life itself is my hobby.

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# Poète maudit?<sup>1</sup>

## An interview with Kristjan Haljak

By Siim Lill

Kristjan Haljak (b. 1990) is a poet, translator, and instructor of literature. Haljak has occasionally been called a Decadent (no matter whether seriously or in jest), and other times a continuer of the surrealistic tradition. Yet, regardless of how active these discourses are or the number of rebirths they undergo, none of them are adequate to pull apart the meanings embedded in his writing, which is already coated in a fine residue of concepts. Currently, Haljak has written four poetry collections (*Fever*, 2014; *Conceptio Immaculata*, 2017; *A New Man*, 2017; and *Verlaine's Revolver*, 2018) and has translated two works of Baudelaire into Estonian (*My Heart Laid Bare* and *Artificial Paradises*).

**It's not unusual for a person to read, and even less unusual for them to start writing. To quote the heterodox thinker Barry Sanders: "This book describes a world peopled with young folk who have bypassed reading and writing, and who thus have been forced to fabricate a life without the benefit of that innermost, intimate guide, the self. [...] It is a world in which young people seek revenge and retaliation rather than self-reflection."<sup>2</sup> How did you arrive at reading and writing, and how was it that they no longer let you go?**

I'm not about to start waving my finger around, saying that not reading produces dim-witted idiots, suffering, death, and violence. It's highly possible that reading and writing are useful means for structuring yourself and your surroundings, for "intellectual cosmetics", but I don't believe the world's pain, death, and anguish are anything that can be avoided by it or that it can manage to ward them off. To paraphrase Michel Houellebecq, perhaps you really can say: If you're unable to place your sufferings into a definite structure, you're screwed. And since we're already namedropping, William S. Burroughs said, in maybe the 60s, that given the immediacy and possibilities of film as a media, it'll be a wonder if anyone continues to read and write books.

I suppose I read books when I was a kid. Back then, it was (still?) the norm. My deeper interest in literature developed later

1 *A cursed poet? (French)*

2 Barry Sanders, "A is for Ox: The Collapse of Literacy and Rise of Violence in an Electronic Age". *New York, Toronto: Vintage Books*, 1995, pp xi–xii.



KRISTJAN HALJAK · PHOTO BY DMITRI KOTJUH

in primary school. I don't know why it hasn't let me go. *There's no scene more atrocious than a young man in his prime who wakes up on a sunny summer morning and grabs... a book.* I've simply been involved in literature the longest; otherwise, I could just as well dedicate myself to some other intellectual sphere. And you do have to dedicate yourself to something... Where else will you find satisfaction? Self-destruction, licentiousness, and other forms of entertainment are all nice and trying ways to pass away your days, but all in all, you're hardly likely to trump intellectual activity. *Suffering should be placed in a structure. [...] Otherwise you're screwed...*

**Building up your academic career, you've compared André Breton to the Estonian poet Andres Ehin, and I hear you're working on Lautréamont and the Estonian modernist Jaan Oks in the framework of your doctoral studies. What does modernism more broadly, as well as its individual expressions such as surrealism, mean to you?**

As for surrealism, it is, on the one hand, a trend of literature and art that does belong to a very specific period. By imitating its specific characteristics, it's possible to semipiternally produce and reproduce endless

writings and visual artefacts that can be classified as surrealist, but which possess an imitative, copy-like nature that today make them almost outdated and unfashionable. On the other hand, one must consider the fact that surrealism is (or at least was, as the original surrealists believed) something significantly greater than a collection of techniques and motifs. Surrealism was and continues to be all-encompassing, transcending art; life-encompassing, transcending life. It turns boring only when artists attempt to “do surrealism”. When nothing takes form aside of a prankish façade; when the only sense it gives is the ambition of imitation. Surrealist art and the surrealist perception existed before and have existed since the birth of the respective movement. The Arab poet Adunis has compared surrealism and Sufism and found their main shared component to be an endeavor towards a certain absolute. Ultimately, all surrealist literature is that which strives to leave the ordinary and banal; which expresses belief in what lies behind, above, below, and next to the shadow of the superficial; which knows that things do not appear the way they should always appear. And it is that which knows and recognizes an obligation to demonstrate that *man has been given language for it to be used surrealistically*.

**The French language and people: what is it about them that fascinates you? Is linguistic proficiency important? In his memoir, the British writer W. S. Maugham said, “It seems hardly worthwhile to take much trouble to acquire a knowledge that can never be more than superficial. I think then it is merely a waste of time to learn more than a smattering of foreign tongues. The**

**only exception I would make to this is French. For French is the common language of educated men, and it is certainly convenient to speak it well enough to be able to treat of any subject of discourse that may arise.”<sup>3</sup> For that matter: do you feel a need to go beyond Estonian-language borders with your writing?**

I don't know whether it was predetermination or chance that led me to French culture. That's what happened and there's nothing I can do about it. Had I been influenced by some other chain of events, then might I have immersed in Polish or Spanish culture instead? Since I've been taught to be critical of any kind of substantiality (and, in a sense, cultural relativism as well), I won't go so far as to claim that there exists a coherent, unified, ideal Frenchism that includes values, powers, and possibilities with a radically limited right to exist outside of it. However, linguistic proficiency is definitely important and, (though perhaps it really isn't defining; there are many good, fascinating authors who don't speak any languages aside of their mother tongue) no matter what your attitude might be towards linguistic-cultural relativism, your opportunities are certainly broadened by speaking different languages. Going further than Estonian-language borders in my writing is intriguing as an idea, but I don't know if I've personally made all that much of an effort in doing so.

**What is your creative process like? Do your poems require a lot of time to settle or for tweaking? They sound**

3 William S. Maugham, *The Summing Up*. William Heinemann Ltd. 1938

**spontaneous, jazz-like, but at the same time, I've realized that is the greatest ability you can have: to make an immense effort in creating something that is seemingly as light as a feather.**

It all depends on what kind of a poem or a cycle I'm writing currently. Quite often, I use techniques similar to cut-up.<sup>4</sup> Lately (basically in all the poems written after those I published in *Conceptio Immaculata* and *A New Man*), I've been thinking on a level of composition broader than that of individual poems. The collections I just mentioned were mostly compiled from freestanding poems, even though a certain cycle-like quality surfaces there, too. I always tweak both free-standing poems and larger compositions: my initial spontaneous bursts need polishing. If I do manage to achieve the allusion of spontaneity or lightness, then I can only be happy for it.

Repeating the widespread truth that content and form are inseparably connected seems downright cliché... So, I also attempt

4 *Even though the Dadaists used a similar chance-based combination technique in their writing, cut-up as such is historically associated more with William Burroughs and Bryon Gysin, both cooperatively and in their individual experimental works. To perform cut-up, one takes existing texts (such as plays or sonnets by Shakespeare and poetry by Rimbaud), cuts them up (even literally, with scissors), and rearranges them together in a new fashion. It's a seemingly simple literary game; however, behind the technique's simplicity lies a particular mystical, esoteric desire to summon the cut-up authors' truth and the true content that would otherwise be hidden.*

to break ingrained formulaic patterns; to write differently; to not repeat myself.

In *Verlaine's Revolver* and other newer projects, I keep up the fight (and, considering the modernist tradition, it's somewhat of an ancient fight already) to break down barriers between poetry and prose, originality and plagiarism. I experiment with (Soviet) encyclopedias, Estonian and world poetry classics, and 20<sup>th</sup>-century prose that shaped the Estonian national narrative one way or another. When doing so, I process my sources for material such that the "modernity", which at least still blinds me momentarily, might flash for even a split second over all that stylistic-thematic and methodical old-fashioned-ness.

**Your latest poetry collection, *Verlaine's Revolver*, was published in late 2018. Could you say a couple words about it?**

Obviously, the title references the weapon one *poète maudit*, Paul Verlaine, used to attempt to kill another, Arthur Rimbaud. Even though he originally bought the gun to kill himself. My experimentation with late-romantic and Decadent tradition branches off from there. The book itself is composed of seven parts, each with nine poems, and each poem comprising fourteen lines. The book's original working title was *The Sonnets*, which is an unambiguous reference to a second-generation author of the New York School – Ted Berrigan – whose "sonnetoids" were largely composed of quotes from literary classics, the works of Berrigan's confrères, and... Berrigan himself. Suffice it to say that the original methodical principle of *Verlaine's Revolver* was similar, likewise.

“outside / the window jazz streamed from speakers / soft soft sound and sobs and / bass and a vodka bottle to boot ...”<sup>5</sup> In addition to a jazziness, your writing is pervaded by two other relatively musical topics that are distinct in Estonian culture, but seemingly reach a consensus through literature: religiousness/spirituality/whatever and eroticism/carnality/urge. This is also reflected in the title of your 2017 collection *Conceptio Immaculata*. What is your relationship to music, and are literature and music connected?

I listen to a lot of music, both while working and for pleasure, but unfortunately, I lack the ability to make it myself. There’s probably no point in digressing here into the historical connection between music and poetry, but I can say I always regard writing’s sound as crucial. I’ve also received feedback that readers have been helped with some poems by hearing me read them aloud in person. Since the lines in my poems are often fragmented and graphically unmarked on a visual scale, I understand that some rhythms may indeed be hard to pick up on paper. However, I hope this certain multiplicity of forms determined by the medium (or, to put it a little disparagingly: the confusion and complication of forms) isn’t overly repugnant to readers.

I suppose the other two topics intertwine, collide, and coexist in my life without annulling each other. It feels like I mostly exist within my own head or my apartment,

5 Kristjan Haljak, *Conceptio Immaculata*. Tallinn: Vihmakass and Kakerdaja, 2017. p. 12 (Translation by Adam Cullen)



picking away at writing, and mainly that of others. There are, of course, both positive and negative excesses and deviations and wanderings and love and what all else. How couldn’t there be? And from a surrealist perspective, the line between life and art, between life and poetry is very obscure.

**What kind of contemporary literature intrigues you? How much do you read? Do bookshelves play a big part in your home?**

I read a lot, though certainly not only prose. As for poetry and prose, I can’t say I have an especially obscure taste when it comes to contemporary authors. I reckon the writers I read are quite well known. I’d be exaggerating if I said I’m very up-to-date with what’s going on in the Western European poetry scene right now, for instance. And it is, unfortunately, hard to keep up. It’s even





KRISTJAN HALJAK · PHOTO BY DMITRI KOTJUH

difficult to read all the poetry published in Estonia. But you've got to keep your eyes open – no one else can be blamed for your own laziness. I'll be horribly hackneyed once again here, but I like, for instance, Michel Houellebecq's prose (and his poetry is fantastic, too, of course). As for American authors, I've recently been reading a lot of Frederick Seidel's poetry. There's something about the Anglo-American post-beat tradition that hasn't been reflected very much in Estonian poetry, but which has fascinated me since I was a teenager. Bookshelves play an important part at home, but there's unfortunately not enough room for them and I don't know or can't be bothered to figure out how to solve the problem. There are better problems to deal with.

**You're an instructor. Has it been a logical course for your life to take?**

**I know a few young teachers who have ended up feeling distressed once they chose the teaching path and seeing how curricula that could span entire years are forced into the smallest-imaginable time-spans; how special-needs students aren't given enough individual attention, but instead are all squeezed into one class; etc., etc. What's your opinion of the teaching profession?**

I studied French language and culture at university. Becoming a teacher is seemingly logical, in that sense. Still, I have to admit that I did simply wind up as one... Strangely, I enjoyed the job, and I like it to this day. It offers a certain social satisfaction that I don't get from puttering around at home alone. I haven't encountered the distress you mentioned in full: I work part-time, I'm not a head teacher, etc. Even so, I can fully understand someone feeling like that.

**To conclude, what are your future plans?**

I have a couple of unfinished manuscripts I'd like to complete. I'm also working on a few translation projects – I suppose the most interesting ones are André Breton's Surrealist manifestos and Lautréamont's *The Songs of Maldoror*. But I've got other projects as well. If possible, I'd like to wrap up my bigger translation projects soon and focus on writing my doctoral thesis.

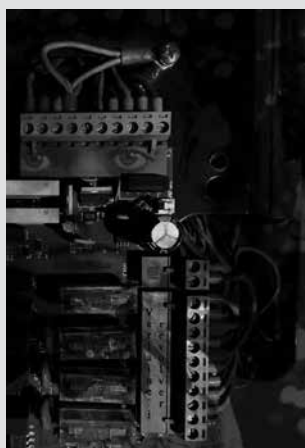
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**SIIM LILL** is an award-winning artist, writer, philosopher, historian, and biologist.

# Poetry by Kristjan Haljak

## From *Verlaine's Revolver*

*Translated by Adam Cullen*



*Verlaine's Revolver by Kristjan Haljak  
Tuum, 2018*

OH SUN OH LIGHT OH DUST

I

this could be rum's dialogue and quotation marks  
but that woman I saw in the woods yesterday didn't listen  
or see I haven't seen anyone or heard any more  
either don't know whether the woods are prepared to fuck

only me all woods have come from somewhere the day is only  
when night descends on the city like a black trash bag  
a person's footsteps under the snow walks across  
a grave in evening unchanged clothes smell

like drunk vodka but the person hasn't  
arrived yet but she's coming but she's coming  
her gloves hang on willow branches

after night when there wasn't a single car on the city  
streets someone's lying upon morning peace's snowy blossoms  
a person as expected dark clear living

### III

a wall like uncut pines beneath a black city  
stones should be lifted from it so it's not  
like a person's footstep advancing towards desires  
and reflecting others' lusts who need to cut something

pine bark into which moisture drew the map of estonia  
should be filled with drawing several people washed ashore  
who have but one head that says and then vice-versa  
light woods a square mirror squeezed tight in palm

evening dries I walk with a liter of red wine  
*ti amo* on the label is grapes to be cut  
I drink so we might walk on the earth again

who flees his fears and doesn't know where to start  
with if something needs to be said walk on the earth  
that must be scraped clean and the fatty cage drawn empty

# Lyrikline – Listen to the poet

## 20 years of spoken poetry

by Elle-Mari Talivee

This year, the Lyrikline.org poetry portal, which was founded in Berlin in 1999, will celebrate its 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Running the site is the *Haus für Poesie* centre (formerly *Literaturwerkstatt* Berlin), their mission is to promote poetry through their cooperative network, which spans 42 countries. The site is intended to help poetry cross national and linguistic borders and to convey the sound, melody, and rhythms of different languages through the literary genre in the authors' own performances and with as many translations as possible. As Lyrikline describes itself, the portal uses poetry to build bridges between languages and cultures.

How does a poetry bridge work? Perhaps the most fascinating aspect of the site is that the poet personally presents their own writing. The melody of a foreign language is entrancing in and of itself, of course, especially when there is a translation available that can be read in tandem. However, a part of the author's nature that is much more mysterious

and difficult to grasp is often encapsulated in the recording. The writer's own intended emphases and interpretations complement the sound of their voice and their textual meanings. The portal also has a photograph and a brief biography for every author, along with their bibliography. Very often, this gives you the feeling that you already know the poet to some extent and makes you want to try to find one of their books, to delve deeper into the newly-discovered world of their writing.

Poetry's greater global dissemination is fostered by Lyrikline publishing translations not only in the most widely-spoken languages (although, as a nod to the site's founders, German-language translations are usually available), but also in smaller or more "exotic" tongues. As of early 2019, there were 1,337 poets with 11,977 poems in 83 different languages and 17,823 translations on Lyrikline. Writing by the Estonian poet Doris Kareva, for instance, can currently be read in seventeen different languages on the portal.

Lyrikline's partner in Estonia is the Estonian Literature Center. The site provides an exceptional opportunity to introduce Estonian poetry to a global audience. As of early this year, poetry samples and recordings by 18 Estonian authors were available, along with many translations. This number will increase sharply in the very near future. Alphabetically, the current lineup of Estonian poets on Lyrikline is Maarja Kangro, Doris Kareva, Veronika Kivisilla, Igor Kotjuh, Hasso Krull, Asko Künnap, Maria Lee, Viivi Luik, Indrek Mesikepp, Tõnu Õnnepalu, Eeva Park, Kaur Riismaa, Birk Rohelend, Jürgen Rooste, Paul-Eerik Rummo, Leelo Tungal, Juhan Viiding, and Elo Viiding. It is wonderful to witness translations popping up on the site. The more translations there are, the more people there are around the world who can read each poem.

Poems uploaded to Lyrikline are selected in partnership with the author. Translators have also actively spoken up on many occasions, and sometimes take a fresh look at the translation. The selection process has been interesting to observe: while the existence of at least one translation is a primary condition, the poet frequently creates a compelling whole with ten or so samples in which the order of poems, for example, might be significant.

Visitors to the Lyrikline site can search for poems in a variety of ways: by country or language, of course, but also by author, translator, or translated language. For instance, one can search for works of authors translated into Estonian. One can search for poems

written in a specific style: Kalju Kruusa, who will soon be published on Lyrikline, has classified his writing in the tanka genre. Visitors can search for rhythmic patterns or a specific topic (i.e. romance, landscape, or summer). Jürgen Rooste, for one, has recorded an unforgettable performance of his poem "*Kassa armastad mind igaviku ääreni*" ("Will You Love Me Until the Edge of Eternity?"). Children's poetry is also available: in Estonia's case, the site has fine samples by the beloved poet Leelo Tungal. Several poems by Viivi Luik are classified with the keywords "philosophy" and "homeland". One might wonder: what on earth is "visual poetry" (such as the poems of Paul-Eerik Rummo), and can it always be performed? Classic recordings of poetry by Bertolt Brecht, Wisława Szymborska, Paul Celan, and Juhan Viiding can be found in The Audible Legacy collection. In short, there is an abundance of opportunities for discovering new poetry.

Celebrations for Lyrikline's anniversary will begin in March, on the 21<sup>st</sup> of which UNESCO's World Poetry Day will also turn the same age. Lyrikline anniversary events will also take place during the "*poesiefestival berlin*" poetry festival, which will be held in the German capital from 14–20 June 2019.

[www.lyrikline.org](http://www.lyrikline.org)

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# Reeli Reinaus: From competition writer to true author

by Jaanika Palm

Not everyone can sufficiently appreciate literary competitions and their effect on the rise of future writers. Such contests are often seen as too superficial, entertainment-centric, or skewed because of the given jury. People think participants are merely amateurs pursuing momentary fame, simply fond of experimenting, or taking the path of least resistance. Many reckon that participants won't become *true* writers, in any case. Reeli Reinaus (b. 1977), who has scooped up the most awards in Estonian children's and young-adult writing competitions, stands as proof of the contrary. She has demonstrated clearly that it doesn't matter which path you take to arrive at literature: it all depends on the specific person and their inner strength, talent, and desire to write.

Since winning her first award in a children's story contest in 2008, Reinaus has written over twenty works for children and young adults. They include short stories about everyday life, books that address common problems, crime novels, thrillers woven

with the supernatural, and picture books for toddlers. Altogether, ten of her books came out after placing in various writing competitions. For example, her works *The Mysterious Diary* (2008), *A Totally Normal Family* (2010), *The Kids of Slum Lane* (2012), and *Detective Stripes at the Zoo* (2013) were published after being entered in the My First Book children's story competition; *The Black Crow* (2010), *From Sugar and Flour* (2015), *Weeks That Scrape Skin* (2012), and *Troubled* (2011) made their way to bookstore shelves via a competition for young-adult manuscripts. Recently, the author also took first place in a young-adult playwriting competition with her work *The World to Which I Belong*. In the jury's unanimous decision, members highlighted Reinaus' realistic characters, well-established structure, intriguing topic, and her use of mythology. All of these aspects have been the author's trademark since the earliest days of her writing.

Reinaus' greatest talent is her knack for noticing life around us. Having entered the



REELI REINAUS · PHOTO BY DMITRI KOTJUH / ECLC

children's literature scene during a period of great changes, with authors generally preferring pure fantasy over realism, she decided to take her writing in a different direction. The haziness and uncertainty over how to approach subjects that were shaking society appeared to not even touch her. True, most of Reinaus' books also include elements of fantasy, whether they be characters or an overall atmosphere, but they show a social orientation regardless. Reinaus was incapable of being the type of writer who sticks their head into the sand, blindfolds themselves, or remains impartial to what is going on around them. The issues she tackles in her works are extremely visible and acute in today's world. Superstition,

xenophobia, blackmail, selling oneself, non-traditional family structures, and political games are just a few of the issues that surface in Reinaus' books and cause great public controversy. It is the author's conviction that real life – that, which readers and their peers encounter every day – must not be shrouded from children behind rosy curtains, but instead introduced, explained, and made understandable to the extent their age allows.

For this reason, the child characters in Reinaus' works are not disengaged from society and do not act within any kind of cutesy idyll that is disconnected from the problem-packed world of adults. Rather,

these characters stand at the very core of reality, existing alongside and together with grown-ups. For example, in her book *How My Dad Got a New Wife* (2016), a father asks his 10-year-old daughter Kaisa for help finding a suitable girlfriend. Since Kaisa's mother died several years earlier and the emotional wounds have since healed, the girl full-heartedly agrees to give her father a hand in the interests of his emotional well-being. Yet the task, which seemed so simple at first, grows ever more complicated with each passing day when it turns out that each of the women who cross their path have their own shortcomings. Reinaus' humorous approach, colorful characters, and realistic situations made the book an immediate hit among young readers. At the same time, Reinaus' method was the target of sharp criticism from several adult readers who questioned the topics' appropriateness in children's literature, asking: "Wouldn't it be better to keep kids away from such problems; to shield them from life?"

However, it is Reinaus' rejected, isolated, and bullied characters in particular who leave the deepest impressions. There is Mari, who dearly wishes to belong to the group of popular girls but doesn't feel a strong enough connection with them on an emotional level (*Pink Angels*, 2014); Pille-Riin, whose love for animals isn't shared by her classmates or her foster family (*Detective Stripes at the Zoo*, 2013); and the dark-skinned orphan boy Seth, who just can't seem to fit in with the other kids at school (*The Black Crow*, 2010). Although Reinaus writes about complicated situations that seem hopeless at first, she always reveals a way out of the dilemmas. The author is not a card-carrying pessimist and never seals shut the door of possibility for good. Karl,

who has turned to the computer world for solace, finds friends in his new city in a very unexpected way. Mari discovers that in addition to their superficial 'babe'-lives, the "pink angels" dream just as big as she does, no matter that the objects of their dreams differ a little from her own. Secretive Liisi (Lisa in the translation), who has been a village outcast with her family for years, finds common ground with the locals only after the boy Marius moves into town (*Marius, Magic and Lisa the Werewolf*, 2017). The author seems to be telling us that everyone is strange, disconnected, and rejected in their own individual ways, but no one is alone forever: they must simply find their true friends and kindred spirits.

Reinaus' young-adult novels also focus greatly on the search for oneself. Her characters often wrestle with parents leaving or being lonely, work on unravelling the complicated relationships they have with one another and strive to find their place in this tough world that offers us so many different choices. Whereas Reinaus can always find at least a grain of understanding for her young characters – be they boys or girls, brave or timid, principled or self-serving – she is significantly more critical of adults. Honesty towards oneself and one's companions rises to become the most essential of virtues.

The large, difficult topics that Reinaus readily takes on are cloaked in a form suitable for children and young adults. Her plots mainly involve solving a puzzle or mystery. Occasionally, the books' titles already stoke excitement: *A Mystery in the Castle Ruins* (2009), *Old Town Detectives* (2017, 2018), and *The Verikambi Mill* (2016). Yet, more often than not, the horizon of anticipation appears in the book's first pages. Reinaus



generally doesn't employ a single, one-track chronological narrative. Her stories are frequently populated by multiple narrators and perspectives, an abundance of flashbacks, and "blasts from the past" that play an important role in the plot's present day. Questions flung into the air throughout the book's very first chapters to satiate impatient readers keep attentions fixated till the very last page, as the author is marvelous at keeping her secrets.

In addition to her realistic problems and characters who resemble actual individuals, Reinaus' works are recognizably idiosyncratic for their use of mystical and folk motifs that are impossible to interpret uniformly. This shouldn't surprise anyone who is fairly familiar with the author's biography. Reinaus graduated from the Tartu Academy of Theology and defended a master's thesis in folklore at the University of Tartu. Werewolves and nightmares, bog spirits and tooth fairies, trolls and witches: they all have a place in Reinaus' books. Also common among her works are spells and rituals to break them; amulets; ingenuity; mystical ghosts of the past; and ancient diaries, volumes, and photo albums. All these add a broadening, magical aspect to her writing, as if she wishes to say that life is not all it seems and there are many dimensions more to existence.

Reinaus is an expert writer of children's stories, young-adult novels and plays, and toddlers' works alike. No matter the genre any one of the books falls into, her writing is, first and foremost, a uniter of people by nature. She laces fascinating connections between the real, the imaginary, and folklore. Merging a mundane view of the world with the supernatural. Her works likewise

allow the separate spheres of children and adults to appear united, whole, and safe, fascinating parents and their kids equally. Why should a reader care that the author drew momentum from a writing competition? Critics and experts haven't been put off by this fact, in any case. Reinaus' works have been included on the IBBY Honor List (*How My Dad Got a New Wife*) and in The White Ravens Catalogue (*Marius, Magic and Lisa the Werewolf*), not to mention the full cupboard of Estonian awards. What's more, a number of her books will soon be published in Russian, Polish, and Korean translations.

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# Marius, Magic and Lisa the Werewolf

by Reeli Reinaus · An excerpt translated by Susan Wilson



Marius, Magic and Lisa the Werewolf  
by Reeli Reinaus. *Päike ja Pilv*, 2017.  
Illustrated by Marja-Liisa Plats

This time Marius moved with utmost care and memorised exactly where he'd come from. He no longer had any intention of dozing off or meeting Lisa. His plan was in fact now to explore the forest a little more deeply. Undisturbed.

But nothing came of it this time either.

Once again he was startled by a girl, but it wasn't Lisa this time.

In fact she was nothing like Lisa. He found this new girl rather elfin in appearance, and what's more, she was smiling at him. Although she had long, almost coal-black hair and a dark complexion, she looked somehow fair and pale. Was he imagining it or was she being friendly?

After they'd said hello, he asked her what she was doing in the forest.

She shrugged her shoulders. "Same as you, so it would seem. It's so lovely here."

Marius nodded. The forest was magnificently beautiful today.

Although paler and lighter than on his earlier visits.

Maybe the very fact that he'd found the forest gloomy before was why he'd lost his way the first time and then the next time just fallen asleep?

"Do you live round here?" asked Marius, who had now learnt that the girl's name was Esme.

Esme nodded. "In the town near yours."

"How do you know which town I live in?" wondered Marius.

Esme laughed. "They talk about you."

"What do they say?" Marius asked.

"That you go into the forest when most people would be to chicken. And that you're friends with that horrible girl."

Marius swallowed hard. "What makes you think she's horrible?"

They weren't friends! Although part of him wished they were.

Esme made a gesture with her hand. "Everyone knows she is. The whole family's a bit weird. Some people even believe that her grandma was a witch."

"A witch?" said Marius in astonishment. "No-one's been scared of witches since the Middle Ages."

"People are still scared of them now. Quite a few people have vanished in the forest. And never been found. Know why?"

Marius shrugged. He wasn't sure whether Esme was trying to scare him or warn him. Whichever it was, what she said had some effect. What if she was right? What if Lisa had an ulterior motive for venturing into the woods? What if she were trying to make people lose their way. Perhaps the reason why she was trying to keep Marius away from here was to stop him discovering some secret involving this place?

"In the olden days people believed that human organs cured disease. Lisa's grandma believed it too. They say that she managed to get loads of people lost. On purpose. And then, as you know..."

"Can't we talk about something else?" interrupted Marius. It seemed ridiculous to believe in witchcraft nowadays, although Esme's words were spine-chilling.

Esme nodded. "Want me to show you the woods' most beautiful lakeside spot?" she offered.

"Lake?" asked Marius. "Is there a lake here?" When he'd studied the map he hadn't noticed any lake.

"Yeah, there's a lake. Come on!"

Esme grabbed Marius by the hand and set off among the trees, dragging him behind her. Some time later they reached a clearing where, sure enough, there was a small lake.

"I usually go swimming here," murmured Esme. "Come on! Let's find out if the water's warm yet."

Marius tagged along to the water's edge and dipped his fingers into the water.

It was indeed warm. Warmer than he'd expected.

"Let's go for a swim!" suggested Esme.

Marius shook his head. "I haven't got my swimming shorts."

"No need for any. Just go in in as you are," Esme replied, pulling at his arm.

Marius was in two minds. The water really was lovely and warm, but something held him back.

Esme grabbed him by the wrist once more; her dark eyes looked at him invitingly. Only now did Marius notice how beautiful she was. Even more beautiful than Lisa. Quite uncannily beautiful.

Too beautiful to be real.

As Esme took a step into the water, Marius noticed the edge of her skirt getting wet.

"We can't really be going swimming fully dressed, can we?" he queried.

"Come on, don't be afraid," whispered Esme. "Nothing will happen." She tugged at him more forcefully.

What might happen to me, pondered Marius and the next instant noticed a large dog bounding towards them.

Esme had seen it too. She leapt out of the water, taking Marius by the hand again.

"Come on, run, it'll hurt you!" she yelled breaking into a run.

They sprinted about a hundred metres and fortunately the dog didn't follow.

"Dogs shouldn't be let loose in the forest," said Marius.

But Esme was apparently paying no attention to his remark.

"I have to go," she said, to his surprise. "But we will go swimming one of these days, won't we?"

Marius nodded.

Esme then disappeared so quickly that he did not even have the chance to ask how they would meet next time.

I should start keeping a diary, thought Marius on the way home. If he made a note of all the strange things that happened here in the forest then perhaps he might be able to make some sense of it all?





AN ILLUSTRATION BY MARJA-LIISA PLATS FROM THE BOOK *MARIUS, MAGIC AND LISA THE WEREWOLF* BY REELI REINAUS

# Ene Mihkelson: “How to become a person? How to be a person?”

by Aija Sakova

Once, a mistake was made, and the mistake was violence  
Even afterward, people were born (poor ones?)  
who adapted to the mistake and lived innocent and unknowing  
like in ancient times But now the wool has fallen  
from everyone's eyes How did they (always they)  
make even more mistakes when they saw  
(they had to see) that the sea is poisoned that the seagull  
is falling that the hawks are going extinct I don't know  
I'm tired Neither does my hand know  
for me to comfort you in your mistake

Ene Mihkelson, *All Ladders are Backwards*, p. 114. Eksa, 2016



ENE MIHKELSON · PHOTO BY HENDRIK OSULA / EKSPRESS MEEDIA/SCANPIX

One of the greats of Estonian literature – a writer of poetry and prose, an uncompromising engager with Estonian history and the depths of the human soul, and a sarcastic stylistic master – passed away on September 20<sup>th</sup>, 2017: Ene Mihkelson (born October 21<sup>st</sup> 1944). On May 12<sup>th</sup>, 2018, the late author's closest friends, and admirers of her work founded the Ene Mihkelson Society at the Estonian Literature Museum

in Tartu. Whereas societies in honor of renowned writers are relatively common in Germany, for example, this is not the case in Estonia. Motivation for establishing the society was firstly a desire to hold Mihkelson's works and intellectual legacy in a place of honor and to support their continued dissemination. As an author, Mihkelson received many significant state and European awards: her works



JANIKA KRONBERG, KRISTJAN SILM AND  
MARJU LAURISTIN

FOUNDING OF THE ENE MIHKELSON SOCIETY AT THE ESTONIAN LITERARY MUSEUM IN TARTU ·  
PHOTOS BY MART VELSKER AND JANIKA KRONBERG

inarguably hold a place in global literature, but have not yet received the widespread attention they rightfully deserve. Secondly, the society was founded with the acknowledgement that many crucial values such as focus, honor, and honesty have fallen into the background in our contemporary world. A world that is progressing at an ever-faster pace and is all too often oriented towards instant gratification. Mihkelson's writing can serve as a gateway to raising and handling these topics.

As I mentioned, the Ene Mihkelson Society was established by the late author's closest friends, as well as literary researchers and fans of her works. The society's goal is not to swell as large as possible, but to consciously shape the (re-)reading and discovery of the author's works, and in doing so to address and cultivate attention towards important issues facing Estonian society. Members are given opportunities to collectively rediscover her writing and to hold honest, engaged discussions on what they have read.

At the society's founding ceremony, the Estonian author Viivi Luik remarked: "Estonian society, which is like a forest plot that has undergone clear-cutting, dearly

needs tree-planters; or, in other words, people who are prepared to stand for and represent the values that also mattered to Ene. These values include openness and depth, honor and honesty, and naturally intellectuality as well. I hope that the work of this society and its members will be visible years from now, because forest planting is a job that takes time."

Marju Lauristin, an Estonian politician and professor of social communication who inherited Mihkelson's legacy, has made donations to the society. The donations are to be used for academic scholarships that support the study of Mihkelson, the popularization of literature, and the research of literature and history alike. Likewise, the society intends to assist and, if necessary, offer monetary support for the broader translation of Mihkelson's writing. As of today, the late author's poetry has been translated into Russian, German, English, Spanish, and Dutch. Only her last novel *Plague Grave* (2007) has been translated into Finnish and Latvian. However, the society's members and admirers believe it is important that Mihkelson's other prose, especially her novel *The Sleep of Ahasuerus* (2001), make it into more widely-spoken





KATRIN SAUKAS



WRITERS VIVI LUUK AND MAIMU BERG

languages (such as German, English, and Russian). *The Sleep of Ahasuerus* was named one of the most significant works of prose published in Estonia since the country's restoration of independence. As a note, yours truly – the author of this article – wrote a German monograph comparing the memory poetics and memory philosophy of Ene Mihkelson with those of the German writer Christa Wolf (*Ausgraben und Erinnern*, 2016).

In autumn of 2018, the Ene Mihkelson Society, in cooperation with the Tartu Cultural Endowment, announced a competition for three research scholarships to support the deeper analysis of Mihkelson's writing.

The society is planning to hold a training session for teachers in 2019 that will focus on comprehensive reading which analyzes and values concentration and slowness. It especially favors cooperation with teachers and students, as the former have the chance to inspire pupils to develop an interest in quality literature and help them slow down and focus through reading. Thus, the society has in turn made it a goal to inspire and encourage Estonian teachers. Over the

coming years, it plans to dedicate several joint training sessions and summer schools to teachers of literature and history.

The works of Ene Mihkelson guide readers to search deeply; to seek the most they can in the world of human thoughts and emotions. Mihkelson was an idealist and a maximalist; she was demanding of both herself and her readers, and her writing has much to offer. She knew the price of fundamental human sensations (love, loss, and yearning); and she was familiar with difficulty and suffering. These are the very familiarities that one requires to experience the world more thoroughly and live life in a more meaningful way.

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**AIJA SAKOVA** 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.

# Book reviews

by Peeter Helme, Krista Kumberg, Elisa-Johanna Liiv, Siim Lill,  
Maarja Helena Meriste, and Tiina Undrits

KRISTIINA EHIN · PHOTO BY GABRIELA LIIVAMÄGI



## KRISTIINA EHIN

AGA ARMASTUSEL ON  
METSALINNU SÜDA  
(*BUT LOVE HAS A FOREST  
BIRD'S HEART*)

2018, 88 pp.  
ISBN 9789949888399

Kristiina Ehin's eighth and latest work *But Love Has a Forest Bird's Heart* is a collection of poems written over the period of 2016–2018. At first glance, the work treads the thematic paths of Ehin's previous

collections. Personal encounters blend with general imagery, nature intertwines with the city, and a yearning for the ancient is knit into the modern day. Still, it seems to be a certain transition in terms of both style and content: the opposite riverbank will materialize only with her next collection.

One major surprise is the dominance of rhyme. Ehin herself has remarked that its use constitutes swimming against the current; not getting stuck; astonishing oneself. Given the level of quality of the Estonian

poetry scene as a whole, her rhyming verse truly reaches for the heights; still, true Semper-like<sup>1</sup> mastery is yet to come. Ehin's rhymes are no doubt childish and naïve from time to time on purpose. Even so, there does appear rhyming that, the more you repeat it, does not cause disquiet.

The reader can perceive an ever more emphatic “social antenna” in Ehin's words, and one would hope it only continues to sharpen (“Our mumble-rappers in the club / fingers glistening from cheap garlic bread”; “shops are locked up / and blood spurts from the fountains”; “and you remain the god of the trees / hauled off to the cellulose factory”). Doubtless this social critique is dosed just high enough for it to go beyond tiny circles, but it'd be nice to hear rebellion that flouts safety zones in the style of Estonia's god-mother of punk, Merle Jääger a.k.a. Merca.

In summary, Ehin's *But Love Has a Forest Bird's Heart* is quite a well-rounded-out collection that speaks to the poet's fans

1 Johannes Semper (1892–1970), a late Estonian author and translator. Among other works, Semper translated Dante's *The New Life into Estonian*.

while simultaneously opening new doors. As with her previous works, the poems are in dialogue with one another and reverberate with inner narrative at length, something out of the ordinary for Estonian literature. In today's cultural drought, there are few intelligent poets whose name touches and speaks to so many readers; whose sensual perception of their surroundings is capable of causing dull private-life details to swell into something great and sentimental; who have the ability to weave myth and topicality. Ehin asks, “I want to know if our language is proud / or destined to slump with its head bowed” With her words, she gives us hope to believe in the former.

**MIHKEL MUTT**  
KÕIK ON HÄSTI. MÕTTED II  
(ALL IS WELL)

*Fabian, 2018. 192 pp.*  
ISBN 9789949933686

Mihkel Mutt's collection of short prose *All is Well*, published in late 2018, is a follow-up to his 2017 collection, *Thoughts*. The author himself has expressed a desire for his writing to still be read in 200 years. Perusing the thoughts put forth in



this latest work, one must admit there is certainly potential.

*All is Well* is divided into five sections, at the core of which are musings about time, aging, Estonian identity, language, writing, historical lessons, mundane life, and eternal questions.

Based on the title, one might assume the book offers reassurance. And that it does, but of course from a characteristically Muttish melancholy and ironic perspective. The statement “all is well” comes only once there is a strong foundation from which to observe today’s idiocies. Thus, Mutt’s essays “More Europeanness” and “Older Persons” can be seen as the girders of the book. Mutt demonstrates that both the nationalist character and European culture (which is in tense dialogue with the former) are currently standing on thin ice, unlike in the early days of the nationalist spirit. One can only enter critical debate with them from a base of Mutt-like intellectual greatness, otherwise the consequences will be unfortunate. On the other hand, Mutt feels like a lone wolf on the local intellectual scene, as several great Estonian minds took entire intellectual sectors along to the grave with them (Mati Unt, Vaino Vahing, Ülev Aaloe, Arvo Alas, Linnart Mäll, and Haljand Udam, just to name some). As someone who has long worked in the field of culture, Mutt urges us to stop “wiping shoes, faces, floors, derrières, and espresso mugs,” to scrutinize our surroundings, to see the simple changes around us (such as the shift in Estonians’ attitudes towards plastic bags and Chinese products in merely a couple of decades), and to grow wiser with age. Mutt delivers all this in an amicably humorous tone, which makes the panic-inducing topics somewhat easier to digest.

*All is Well* is dense and steady in caliber, which makes it difficult to summarize – each essay is crystallized. They are like a handful of tea leaves that swell and impart their concentrated flavors when immersed in the hot water of reading. Only two or three improper remarks that stray from general course scar the overall impression (comments about feminists and vibrators, etc.). Nevertheless, this does not detract from the value of Mutt’s other thoughts and doesn’t diminish the hope that they won’t merely end up collecting dust on bookshelves until the next generation takes them out to the recycling bin, but rather will enjoy their covers being worn thin from constant reading. **SL**

**KAI AARELEID**  
SALAEUD  
(*SECRET LIVES*)

*Varrak, 2018. 152 pp.*  
*ISBN 9789985345016*

Kai Aareleid’s first short-story collection *Secret Lives* comprises novellas and miniatures written from 2010–2018. The collection includes the 2013 Friedebert Tuglas Short-Story Award winner “Tango”. Every story is connected by a point of surprise that ties the various plots together into a seamless whole.

In many cases, the female protagonists bear a resemblance to the author herself: take for example the opening story “Innocence”, which details the narrator’s first encounter with death. It is a beautiful and painful tale of young friendship that, unfortunately, isn’t allowed to “grow old”. At the book’s release event in October 2018, the author mentioned that she sent her daughter



“Innocence” to read. Teary-eyed, Aareleid’s daughter asked why she wrote such sad stories. I have to admit that my eyes didn’t stay dry, either. You’ve been warned.

Aareleid’s stories “Innocence” and “The White Dress” also come off as farewells. In the first, the narrator must say goodbye to a friend; in the second, to her dear mum. The title of the book itself also hints at facets of the author’s personal life. Thus, with the other stories as well, the reader is inclined to ask: is Aareleid herself the one putting on a tango dress for a night at the theater? Has she been a mistress, or rather the one cheated on with secret lovers? At the same time, the art of writing naturally allows an author to experience these (and many other) situations from their desk, which could similarly be a hint that shimmers behind the book’s title.

Aareleid has an incredible talent for misleading the reader – meant in the best way possible. For example, at the beginning of “Fugue”, we read about thoughts that have been keeping Kristin up at night since her divorce. Halfway through the story, we

suspect the character might have amnesia, and by the end, it seems like the execution of a perfect crime. The author insinuates where the story might lead, and then takes an entirely different direction. I might add that the ending of “Fugue” (and several of Aareleid’s other stories) is open-ended: readers are left alone with their imaginations to contemplate what happens next.

All in all, I wasn’t prepared for this book. It came, surprised me, brought tears to my eyes, made me laugh, and then set me free again. As free as one can be after a literary experience that shakes you to the core. Be prepared. **EJL**

**MEHIS HEINSAAR**  
 PINGEVÄLJADE AEDNIK  
 (*THE GARDENER OF TENSION*  
*FIELDS*)

*Verb, 2018. 96 pp.*  
*ISBN 9789949723812*

Mehis Heinsaar’s baroquely fantastical world of writing no longer needs a greater introduction for Estonian readers. The



mystical beings and ancient fairy-tale landscapes of his earlier works also find a place in his second poetry collection, *The Gardener of Tension Fields*. Yet, compared to the author's earlier writing, it's immediately clear that this atmosphere is particularly sleepy and overgrown. As if in a hang-over from a phase of exceptional vibrancy or within a state of gradual degeneration. It is not a deep, blissful peace, but rather an incapacitating numbness. This world is populated by choked ponds, faded walls, tepid tea, moss-covered fences, and stale coffee.

Still, Heinsaar doesn't appear to be practicing post-apocalyptic philosophy in his poems: man's own deeper existence has been covered in the bramble of oblivion instead. The way from this forgotten state to the soul's primeval homeland is a "barely perceptible path" to "where there is / no way back" (p. 22). Flanking this journey are bizarre beings who constantly spy upon the journeyer: "I AM A DWARF / on this narrow and overgrown path / in your own spiritual land / a path you don't dare / to tread" (p. 44); "An ancient woman / sits upon a branch / watching you / with

a frozen gaze / as you pass / beneath" (p. 36).

Heinsaar is a masterful storyteller, which is also reflected in his poetry. Captivating and with wonderful conclusions, the poems can be enjoyed at face value and do not require colossal poetic interpretation to bear their charm. It does, however, seem that the fairy-tale layer is no longer so all-encompassing. Magic blends with the poet's frank confessions and unconcealed inner searching. Heinsaar's own fragility and confessional tone are increasingly discernible, especially in his mammoth poem "A Defense of Failure" (pp 50–53) and in the questions he sets forth in "THE SECRET is near" (p. 60). Readers find themselves in a delicate position: a gripping fairy tale and a subtle confession scroll by simultaneously. Additionally, Heinsaar writes something in *The Gardener of Tension Fields* that might be taken as his creative credo: "You are a mystery to yourself, / you are something in-between: / not bird, nor beast, nor person. / Nearly a thousand possibilities / crystallize in your jointish eyes; / nearly a hundred strange and dangerous paths

/ in the shadow or light of which you may resume / your clawish life's path." (p. 73) These deviations onto a dimension outside of fantasy underpin his fairy-tale world by showing the importance of adventuring in non-rational spheres in order to resolve one's own mysteries – every person's most critical of tasks.

**VERONIKA KIVISILLA**  
**KUNI ARMASTUS PEALE TULEB**  
**(UNTIL LOVE SPARKS)**

*Hunt, 2018. 224 pp.*

ISBN 9789949731909

Occasionally, people speak in alarm about how the digital age has sentenced 'cherished old book culture' to inevitable extinction; because the unbridled stream of online writing will simply triumph in the battle for textual existence. Yet, perhaps the situation isn't so hopeless after all and these two mediums can exist side-by-side in harmony.

Veronika Kivisilla's *Until Love Sparks* is a collection of everyday shards of thought that made their debut not on the book's

pages, but on the author's Facebook wall. Something about the essence of these observations once typed out into the vastness of the internet transforms when printed between book covers. They are given a unifying title, a beginning and an end, design, and a physical form: in short, a certain literary claim and poetic prestige.

Kivisilla writes about everything "little and temporal" that we encounter in our daily lives but sticks in our memory for some reason. Snippets of conversation overheard on the bus. A mundane scene that captures your attention. Nature. Pearls of wisdom that tumble from your child's mouth. The latter is clearly of chief importance in the work. Kivisilla's own two children, especially her younger son, serve as an adhesive and keep one conscious in the daily grind that might not seem so special to a dulled adult gaze. Behind the writing lies a poetic stance, according to which, that which is important and meaningful is not revealed in a philosophical bubble hovering above "crumbs" of the mundane, but the very opposite. That, which is important is concealed in the little elements of ordinary living, and the key to wisdom is an ability to zoom into these tiny fragments, not out from them.



To the extent that the brief poetic scenes speak for themselves, Kivisilla's writing is unforced and natural, lacking sought-after metaphors and wordplay (though the latter does pour from her son's mouth) or an attempt to create the Great Word. One can interpret a kind of resistance to the intended cliché and sloganeering that has beset contemporary writing.

If one were to try to phrase another fundamental notion that peeks out from behind Kivisilla's short pieces, it might be that youth is not degenerate. Occasionally, the author's tone reflects melancholy over a lost world. A world to which children appear to enjoy uninhibited access, but which we as adults seek through nostalgia, lofty philosophy, or high art. *Until Love Sparks* is a collection of fragments, trimmed by the safe, warm, peaceful, and at the same time meaningful atmosphere of one's cozy den. **MHM**

**MAARJA KANGRO**  
MINU AUHINNAD  
(MY AWARDS)

*Nähtamatu Ahv, 2018. 336 pp.*  
ISBN 9789949886623

Writing about literature is always rife with dangers. One pitfall is that the author ends up writing only to his or her clique: the work might indeed delight other writers, publishers, translators, and critics, but it isn't able to penetrate a wider audience. Maarja Kangro generally steered clear of these shoals with *My Awards*, but more on that below. Another danger is somewhat converse: the author spills the beans on something important, betrays colleagues,

or sacrifices trust in the name of flirting with larger and broader audiences. Kangro has also avoided this trap, for the most part; again, I'll explain more below.

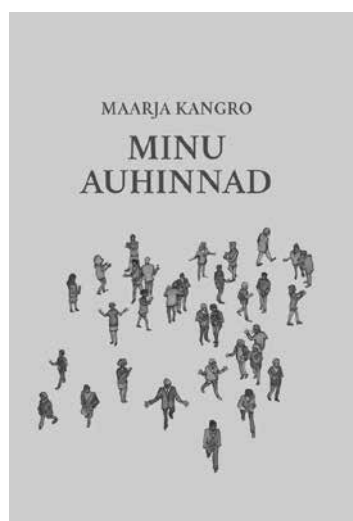
As always, let's start from the beginning. Kangro, probably one of the most highly-awarded contemporary Estonian writers, decided to write about the "award culture" she has encountered over the years from multiple angles – including from the receiving end and from her experience on various award juries.

By referencing a popular Estonian travelogue series in her title (books in which include *My Moscow*, *My Bali*, *My Canada*, etc.), the author invites readers to journey with her into the world of awards: a mystical and exciting place all writers wish to enter, and the inner workings of which all readers would like to glimpse.

In *My Awards*, Kangro gives an account of each prize's winning and reception in individual chapters. Each chapter includes factual overviews of the emotions that took hold of her when she was informed of the honor, fame, and fortune (of course the fortune – writers aren't concerned with anything else!); the manner in which the award ceremony was conducted; what one or another colleague or close friend said; and the course conversations took during the ceremony or at the afterparty.

Since each chapter follows an identical format, *My Awards* might be dull for readers unfamiliar with the Estonian literary scene and its characters. At the same time, the work paints a fair picture particularly of how literary life functions at the grassroots level.





The second half of the work comprises nonfiction commentary, in which Kangro addresses the sociology behind awards, the history of award culture, and the devaluation of awards in modern society, resulting in attempts to make everyone winners and no one losers. Additionally, leaning upon studies published by psychologists, sociologists, philosophers, and educational experts, she attempts to crack the part of the human psyche concerned with a need for recognition.

Before answering whether *My Awards* is a work of fiction or nonfiction, we should return to the beginning of this review and declare whether or not Kangro has written a book that solely interests her fellow writers, and if any critical secrets have been disclosed with the aim of winning popular appeal.

As I mentioned, the book is certainly more intriguing to Kangro's own colleagues: every character appears under their real name, and we often even find them engaging in direct speech. Some readers might be bothered by this approach, but perhaps not

excessively, as Kangro is in no way hostile. The realistic setting has more of a relaxed atmosphere and affirms to every reader who is not an author: Yes, that's the way these things go. As such, *My Awards* delivers genuine insight into the Estonian literary scene, and therefore I must say that in spite of its general readability, the work presumes the reader has not only an interest in the topic at hand, but also possesses at least some basic knowledge of the Estonian literary scene.

The answer to the second question is more succinct: No. Kangro betrays nothing and no one. Rather, her colleagues are given a sidelong view of themselves, their endeavors, and their "biotope", and it is very refreshing.

Based on these two truths put together, one can conclude that Kangro's work is both fiction and is not. It speaks of true events in a positive and witty tone, and whosoever wishes can take the stories as a collection of memoirist essays, while others can take them as anecdotes.



**REIN RAUD**  
**VIIMANE KUSTUTAB TULE**  
*(LAST ONE TURNS OUT THE LIGHT)*

*Salv, 2018. 192 pp.*  
*ISBN 9789949887408*

Rein Raud is an author riveted by society. In addition to writing prose, poetry, and drama, he is widely known as a polemical critic of Estonian journalism. Yet if the topic at hand concerns greater problems spanning generations and transcending society, Raud does not restrain himself to a mere opinion pieces: he addresses the issues in literary form.

*Last One Turns Out the Light* is a novel in which sci-fi enthusiasts will see sci-fi, but politics enthusiasts will find a political thriller. The book is also highly enjoyable in terms of language and style.

Raud himself has said he believes good literature shouldn't have to be dull. He's similarly remarked that good writing is more important than genre. It's certainly worth

taking these two standpoints into account when delving into the author's new book.

The plot, which is seemingly realistic at first and centers on a female Estonian journalist, goes into full gear with a scene that is unusually shocking for Estonian literature: the Prime Minister of the Republic of Estonia is murdered. And if only it were some kind of "ordinary" murder! But no: while delivering a press conference, the politician is bitten to death by a crazed religious fanatic who has sharpened his teeth using a file meant for medical scalpels!

The incident sets off an electrifying chain of events in which the author has an opportunity to address the dangers and woes troubling not only Estonia, but Western society as a whole. How much honesty and disclosure can society take? Is democracy real, or are there forces channeling the opinions of dim-witted masses into suitable troughs? Does freedom possess an individual virtue, or should people be protected from such destructive urges?

*Last One Turns Out the Light* circles the conspiracy-theory notion of the “deep state” that has broken into public discourse over the last few years, and causes readers to question: So what if it really exists? That’s the catch Raud sets for his reader. He directs attention to the point that outweighing the question of whether the deep state (or, for that matter, any of the other conspiracy theories that go around) is real or fantasy is the fact that you can always find people who believe such things. In this way, our society is affected by fantasies, fears, and fabrications that might have no other foundation than the fact that there exist people who base their behavior on such notions. Likewise, what is reality? Is the truth really out there, or is even that concept merely a specter that our troubled brains have conjured up?

Nevertheless, Raud doesn’t get very grim in his treatment of the issues. The novel is stylistically light, fast-paced, and pleasantly fluid. The author puts quite a few spins on several of the ideas, leaving the reader with a gnawing sense of unease that strengthens the work’s grounding in true-to-life present-day Estonia.

It’s worth mentioning that Raud has promised a sequel to *Last One Turns Out the Light*, in which the entire plot of the first work is observed from a different perspective. Whereas the first book focuses on an investigative journalist, the author has revealed the next will view the events through the eyes of the secret service. **PH**

**ANDRUS KIVIRÄHK**  
TILDA JA TOLMUINGEL  
(*TILDA AND THE DUST ANGEL*)

*FD Distribution, 2018. 144 pp.*  
*ISBN 9789949724802*

For anyone expecting to find Andrus Kivirähk’s usual mischievous humor imbedded with important messages in his new children’s book, get ready to recalibrate. The work primarily concerns important values (such as caring and memory); although the author certainly hasn’t completely pushed jokes and escapades to the side. At first glance, one might assume it’s yet another book that deals with children’s worries and woes. Tilda’s father has died, her mother is burying herself in work that



she doesn't actually enjoy, and nothing can seem to ease the pain in the young widow's heart. At the same time, Tilda's own heartache is more because she doesn't have a single memory of her father. To make it worse, the girl's mother refuses to share any of her own memories.

This is where dust intervenes: or, to be exact, a dust angel with the appearance of a cute little creature who suddenly materializes in the silence of their attic. The being thus explains its existence to Tilda: "I am dust," the little creature said, "which means I am also your father. I am everything that's ever been, for nothing disappears without a trace. Everything remains. Everything turns to dust." The dust angel's sageness is dampened by its weakness for buttons: it pilfers them anywhere it can, only to exchange old favorites for new ones without a shred of regret.

The invisible being's touch can summon forgotten memories, a skill that turns out to be unexpectedly important and even thoroughly life-changing. This is precisely the mission and the goal of all dust angels: to preserve memories and remind people of them. Dark-skinned and curly-haired Köh, who spent his childhood in an orphanage, realizes that the customs and the tastes of his people live on within him. Miss Wilhelmine, whose grandparents' house and land were bulldozed to make room for the inventor Abel Ragnarson's factory, has unconsciously replicated her childhood when making her new home, though the result hasn't brought her joy – that is, of course, until the dust angel reminds her that home is not only walls; home is people.

*Tilda and the Dust Angel* lacks classical villains. However, two worldviews do clash in the work: Ragnarson, an avid clean-freak, intends to liberate the whole city of dust. He reckons he can already remember everything of importance, such as mathematics and other "necessary" details. Whatever he doesn't remember, he can find in a computer. Ragnarson doesn't care for the times and peoples of old: to him, the past is boring, but a pure and dust-free (or memory-free) future is perfection. "I will change everything," he declares. Estonia has also endured times when memories and remembering were condemned and even made punishable; when faces were turned towards a fortune awaiting in the future. Even today, a similar manner of thought seems to be gaining traction: that perhaps past times, people, and events can be forgotten because all that matters is what's new. The idea that ever-smarter digital solutions can guarantee overall happiness.

Thanks to the dust angel, Tilda and her mother are able to reminisce about their late loved one together, the little boy Lucas finds out who he wants to be when he grows up, Köh regains the ability to taste, and Miss Wilhelmine opens a café instead of an electronics shop. Even Ragnarson and his factory, which ultimately explodes into smithereens, remain in a way. Everything that people remember continues to exist forever. **KK**



## ANTI SAAR

### PÄRT JA VIIMANE KOOGITÜKK (PÄRT AND THE LAST PIECE OF CAKE)

*Päike ja Pilv, 2018. 32 pp.*  
ISBN 9789949728527

Growing up is a big adventure and a challenge, especially when you're a seven-year-old boy who doesn't quite understand how the world works yet.

For example, what are you to do when a neighbor-girl teases you or your father suddenly goes missing at the grocery store? Who owns the tasty plum that drops onto your head on the sidewalk? And what about the other plum that's hanging on a tree in a stranger's yard and is almost in reach? How can you get the last free piece of cake that guests brought over all for yourself?

To date, Anti Saar has written four books in his "Pärt" series: *Pärt and the Last Piece of Cake*; *Stand Here, Pärt!*; *Pärt and the Plums*; and *Pärt Can't Do a Backflip*. Each has been warmly received by young audiences, and the fifth is soon to come. The

stories center on situations that demand quick problem-solving. Pärt is faced by challenges that set his thoughts and vivid imagination in motion, and in the process of solving them, the boy experiences emotions to which children of all ages can relate.

In *Pärt and the Last Piece of Cake*, Pärt concocts a plan to get his hands on a dessert he so longs to have and gets right to work, believing he's entirely justified in doing so: "On top of that, it just had to be fair for the last piece of cake to belong to the person who got such an unfairly small piece the first time around." However, Pärt's scheme hits an unexpected obstacle, forcing him to come up with a new plan of action. This second approach doesn't go off without a hitch either, as the guests begin to show a sudden heightened interest in what Pärt is up to. "...when I saw that Aunt Asta had found my drawing pad and colored pencils, I knew right away that nothing good was about to happen." How can the boy be polite and social when the only thought pounding in his head is getting the last piece of cake? A piece that has disappeared by the time he returns to the living room!

There are surprises and twists galore in all of Pärt's stories. The child is unable to foresee situations that an adult with their experience might readily assume. He dives headfirst into every challenge, his mind filled with a whirlwind of his parents' instructions, bits of wisdom picked up from books, a wild fantasy, childish egotism, and a desire to be well-behaved. Through the boy's eyes, we embark upon a narration of a child's ordinary day packed with an astonishing number of crucial and exceptional circumstances. The path through Pärt's thoughts is witty, enjoyable, and exciting. His logic takes unexpected turns while remaining entirely credible.

Whereas Pärt loves to think everything through, the neighbor-girl named Kaisa has no qualms making speedy decisions. She behaves spontaneously and selfishly, adding a sizzle to the books from the clash of two contradictory perspectives. Young readers learn about the multiplicity of views and the importance of taking other people into account.

Pärt's family teaches him this same lesson. The boy's father or big brother always seem to show up in the nick of time whenever he starts to falter, helping him arrive at a solution. His family is affectionate and supportive, and his cozy home in a garden suburb is the ideal place to get to know the world.

Children are influenced by every person with whom they come into contact. Pärt's mind wanders to his grandparents' activities as well as to Kaisa's grandmother, whose folk wisdom is fast-working stuff that appears in almost every story. "I was already getting ready to jump when a thought flashed through my mind: God

sees you! God sees everything you do, even in the dark! He's even got sharper eyesight than a wolf! Kaisa's grandma told me that." The saying that it takes a whole village to raise a child seems to hold true, no matter what strange characters they may meet along the way.

Hopefully, Saar won't let Pärt – who has now reached school age – grow up too fast, so that the book series brimming with capers and discoveries might last a long time more. **TU**

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**PEETER HELME** is an Estonian writer and journalist. Helme has published six novels. His latest, *The Swastika and the Time Weapon*, was published in early 2019.

**TIINA UNDRITS** is an avid reader and researcher who works at the Estonian Children's Literature Center. She is also a co-author of the extensive Estonian-language work *The Gold Standard of Estonian Children's Literature* (2018).

**KRISTA KUMBERG** is a librarian and researcher of children's literature. She has written essays for the collections *The Gold Standard of Estonian Children's Literature* (2018), *Estonian Children's and Young-Adult Literature 1991–2012* (2014), *The Children's Literature Dictionary* (2006), and is also the author of five books for toddlers and a drama collection.

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**ELISA-JOHANNA LIIV** studies cultural theory, Japanese language, and life around her. She spends a great deal of her time on trains, often in the company of books. Together with a friend, Liiv is the co-founder and co-spirit behind the independent Tallinn bookstore Puänt.

**SIIM LILL** is an award-winning artist, writer, philosopher, historian, and biologist.

# Selected translations 2018

## Danish

Title	Mesilased
Title *	<i>Pilekongen</i>
Author	Meelis Friedenthal
Genre	Novels
Translator	Birgita Bonde Hansen
Publisher	Jensen & Dalgaard, 2018
Pages	234



## Dutch

Title	Kolme katku vahel
Title *	<i>Tussen drie plagen</i>
Author	Jaan Kross
Genre	Novels
Translators	Frans van Nes, Jesse Niemeijer
Publisher	Prometheus, 2018
Pages	1104

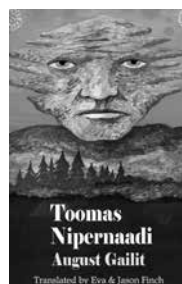


## English

Title	Armuaeg
Title *	<i>Days of Grace: Selected Poems</i>
Author	Doris Kareva
Genre	Poetry
Translator	Miriam Anne McIlpatrick-Ksenofontov
Publisher	Bloodaxe Books, 2018
Pages	128

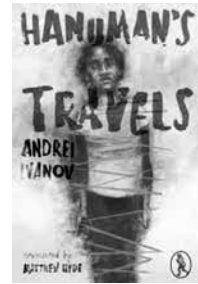


Title	Toomas Nipernaadi
Title *	<i>Toomas Nipernaadi</i>
Author	August Gailit
Genre	Novels
Translators	Eva Finch, Jason Finch
Publisher	Dedalus, 2018
Pages	378





Title Путешествие Ханумана на Лолланд  
 Title \* *Hanuman's Travels*  
 Author Andrei Ivanov  
 Genre Novels  
 Translator Matthew Hyde  
 Publisher Vagabond Voices, 2018  
 Pages 410



Title Kõik on kõige targemad  
 Title \* *Everyone is the Smartest*  
 Author Contra  
 Illustrator Ulla Saar  
 Genre Poetry for children  
 Translators Charlotte Geater, Kätlin Kaldmaa, Richard O'Brien  
 Publisher The Emma Press  
 Pages 96



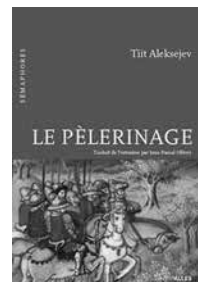
## **Finnish**

Title Gogoli disko  
 Title \* *Gogolin disko*  
 Author Paavo Matsin  
 Genre Novels  
 Translator Sanna Immanen  
 Publisher Savukeidas, 2018  
 Pages 155



## **French**

Title Palveränd  
 Title \* *Le Pèlerinage*  
 Author Tiit Aleksejev  
 Genre Novels  
 Translator Jean Pascal Ollivry  
 Publisher Editions Intervalles, 2018  
 Pages 384



Title Kõik minu sugulased  
 Title\* *Une drôle de famille*  
 Genre Children's literature  
 Author Piret Raud  
 Translator Martin Carayol  
 Publisher Éditions du Rouergue  
 Pages 160



## German

Title Klaaslaps  
 Title \* *Kind aus Glas*  
 Author Maarja Kangro  
 Genre Novels  
 Translator Cornelius Hasselblatt  
 Publisher Kommode Verlag, 2018  
 Pages 208



## Greek

Title Eesti luuletajate antoloogia  
 Title \* *Ανθολογία Εσθονικής ποίησης: ...απ' τον αμίλητο καιρό*  
 Authors Betti Alver, Kristiina Ehin, Ernst Enno, Jaan Kaplinski, Doris Kareva, Juhan Liiv, Karl Ristikivi, Paul-Eerik Rummo, Hando Runnel, Jüri Talvet, Heiti Talvik, Marie Under, Mari Vallisoo, Juhan Viiding  
 Genre Anthologies  
 Translators Magdalini Thoma  
 Publisher Vakkikon, 2018  
 Pages 196



Find a wealth of other translations from 2018 and earlier (including the whopping 21 English translations published last year alone) in the Estonian Literature Center's database [www.estlit.ee](http://www.estlit.ee) and on the Estonian Children's Literature Centre's site [www.elk.ee](http://www.elk.ee)

The logo for Eesti Instituut 30 is a circular emblem. It features a light blue background with a stylized, multi-pointed star or sunburst pattern in a slightly darker shade of blue. Overlaid on this pattern is the text "Eesti Instituut" in a large, black, sans-serif font, with "30" centered below it in a slightly smaller font of the same style.

# Eesti Instituut 30

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

The Estonian Institute has offices in Tallinn, Helsinki, and Budapest. It is partnered with several universities abroad to facilitate the instruction of the Estonian language, as well as with Estonian communities around the world. Our wide array of web and print publications introduce the country's contemporary culture, history, and creative environment.

The *Estonian Literary Magazine* is the only English-language publication that introduces Estonian literature. The first copy of *ELM* was printed in 1995, and it has since been published biannually.

*ELM* is also available online at [elm.estinst.ee](http://elm.estinst.ee).

## A WALPURGIS NIGHT POEM

Green-haired Nobody  
sits hunched over  
the book he found in the ditch,  
not moving a muscle.

“There’s still a great deal needed  
to be discussed and done,  
and tiring roads  
and dusty times  
await us,”  
he ponders,  
paying no heed to the Ural owl  
that whooshes right through him.

“It’s our last chance to rewrite  
a few of these passages,”  
he whispers, threatening the yellow letters  
with his finger dark as night,  
snickering evilly  
and vanishing right then and there –  
as if he had ever existed.

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**MEHIS HEINSAAR**

TRANSLATED BY ADAM CULLEN

