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On the Cover: Jaan Kross in 1938. Photo: Family archive

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Contents

A path a quarter-century long

by Krista Kaer

A very long time ago, so long now that it came as a great surprise even to myself, Piret Viires and I were the original editors of *Estonian Literary Magazine*. The first issue was published by the Estonian Institute in autumn 1995 and arose out of a crucial need – to introduce Estonian literature to the world. Even then, Estonian writing wasn't entirely unknown outside of the country, which was evident from the list of titles translated into foreign languages that we printed at the end of the issue. Most were released in the 1980s and 1990s, and their publishing relied on chance, the enthusiasm of the translators, or the Estonian authors' own initiatives. It was primarily the works of Jaan Kross and Jaan Kaplinski that had been published in English translation, the former likely being the most widely translated Estonian author at the time. Then, new Estonian publishing houses formed in the 1990s. The publishers started attending international book fairs, where they were frequently questioned about literature from the country. Foreign publishers sensed new opportunities – yet-undiscovered masterpieces could be hiding somewhere in the Baltic states, or authors there might presently be writing books that struck to the heart of that turbulent zeitgeist! Simultaneously, Estonia's ties to Scandinavian countries and their respective literary organizations were strengthening; countries that had already developed a flawless mechanism for disseminating Nordic literature abroad. Christopher MacLehose, who had dedicated himself to the quite thankless task of publishing translated literature in English, also turned his attention to Estonia, releasing translations of Kross's works and wondering whether he might also discover other gems in the country. Estonians, in turn, were thrilled to discern this heightened interest, as we felt we had so much to share with the world – our whole range of literary classics; fantastic new works; and poetry, in which our nation takes such pride. The gates to the world had swung open and we endeavored to import, convey, and translate as much as we possibly could. At the same time, there was the aspiration to exhibit our own cherished cultural traits. How could all this be accomplished? We needed English-language copy, literary overviews, author biographies, and translated excerpts. We needed high-quality

KRISTA KAER. PHOTO BY LIIS TREIMANN ÄRIPÄEV / SCANPIX BALTICS

translators who spoke English as a native language, but could also grasp the intricacies of Estonian. Such a magazine had to be published in English if we wished to make ourselves accessible to as many readers as possible. At first, we had only Eric Dickens, a few members of the Estonian diaspora, and some Estonians who had lived in English-speaking areas for long periods of time. The Estonian Literature Center

didn't exist yet, being founded only in 2001. Foreign inquiries were made either to the Estonian Writers' Union or the Estonian Institute, as the promotion of Estonian culture abroad had come to be one of the latter's central tasks. Thus, *Estonian Literary Magazine* came into being in collaboration between the Estonian Writers' Union and the Estonian Institute. The workload was enormous, as we had to start from scratch. In any case, this beginning was marked by Eric Dickens's translations of Kristjan-Jaak Peterson's poems 'The Moon' and 'The Bard'. Mati Sirkel, who was then chairman of the Estonian Writers' Union, wrote an overview of the history of Estonian literature and its status in the 1990s, which is still relevant today. It should be supplemented with the developments that have taken place over the last 25 years, of course, but the piece remains a fine introduction to the field of Estonian literature.

In his brief foreword to the new publication, Sirkel wrote that literature is one way to be in connection with eternity, adding that unlike visual art and music, the field requires mediators – translators – to add its colors to world literature. I wrote a piece about translated literature as a part of Estonian literature as a whole, and can now say that the trends I noticed at the time – the proliferation of literature translated into Estonian and declining print runs of high-quality literature – have not gone away, but rather have compounded. The opportunities and support for the translation of quality literature are issues that have not diminished in importance today.

Naturally, one crucial task was to find people who could translate Estonian literature into other languages. Eric Dickens was our primary translator for the first issue, though Jonathan Roper translated Kauksi Ülle's ethno-futurist poetry and I did many of the translations myself. This shows how difficult it was for us to find qualified individuals – I certainly would no longer dare to take on such a role, and nor should I. The situation began to improve over time, but in the early days it helped to have a local editor read through the translations – even a fluent translator could get stuck grasping some of the finer details of Estonian life and the result was not always what was originally intended. This concerned the English translations of Estonian literature, of course – translations into other languages accumulated over time as enthusiasts of Estonian language and literature soon found opportunities to visit the country and familiarize with its books and authors.

Whereas the first issue of *Estonian Literary Magazine* aimed to define the overall nature of the genre, the following issues narrowed in focus, providing an overview of books published in the 1990s as well as reviews of individual titles. Nevertheless, the list of Estonian works published in translation that we included at the end of each issue remained largely static for a long time. The cause was elementary: the pool of translators was gradually increasing, Estonia and the Estonian language are unusual enough to arouse broader interest, and Estonia in the 1990s enchanted foreigners with its exoticism. It was much harder, however, to find foreign publishers willing to put out Estonian literature in translation. Pure enthusiasm was no longer enough when financial interests came into play. Rumor had it that some foreign publishing houses abandoned Estonian literature after running into severe losses with the release of

just a couple of titles. *Estonian Literary Magazine* was flourishing, but it was also clear that more was needed to introduce the world to Estonian literature. We needed to go further.

This step forward meant establishing the Estonian Literature Center in 2001 and beginning to systematically export Estonian literature. I was witness to it from the very start and know how much time and effort this truly took. The world is full of books, more and more are published every day, and it's extremely difficult for a small nation's literature to become globally visible and read. Occasionally, one translated title will stand out and a few other authors from the country will ride its wave of popularity. Such was the case with Peter Hoeg and Scandinavian crime novels, but these lone works have remained just that, for the most part. For example, predictions have long been made of the rise of Central European literature, but to date, it has failed to happen. Being the country of focus during large book fairs always delivers some degree of interest in translating your country's literature, but the excitement tends to quickly fade. Until recently, the English-language world regarded translated literature with a degree of skepticism overall. The situation has begun to shift, but a publisher must still go to great lengths for the translated work of an Estonian author to gain real attention. Additionally, the Estonian Literature Center must first convince such publishers that it's all worth their trouble.

Here, *Estonian Literary Magazine* – which is now published with the support of the Estonian Institute, the Estonian Writers' Union, and the Estonian Literature Center – is an incredible asset. This is the magazine's 50th issue and the difference is striking when you compare the latest to the very first. The *Estonian Literary Magazine* has grown and is now truly worthy of its title. The translations are professional, and the literary excerpts and reviewed titles are selected by its editorial board. It has been years since every Estonian work that has been translated into a foreign language could fit on the last pages of the issue, and even only a selection of those that have been published in the last year are printed today. I wish *Estonian Literary Magazine* many more years to come with the firm belief that its editors will not encounter a lack of content, but rather of space, because never before has Estonian literature been translated to the extent that it is today.

Plain differences between the first and latest issues of the magazine do stand out, but aside of a sincere desire to promote Estonian literature abroad, they have something else in common. Specifically, the first issue included a review of and translated excerpt from Tõnu Õnnepalu's *Border State*, while the 49th issue features the author as well with a translated excerpt from his novel *Acre*, reviews of *Acre* and *Paris*, and a conversation between Õnnepalu and Viivi Luik. It seems that times may certainly change, but not all is evanescent.

KRISTA KAER is a translator and publisher. She also belongs to the team of the Tallinn HeadRead Literary Festival. At the time Estonian Literary Magazine was founded she worked in the Estonian Institute as a consultant on Great Britain and Ireland.

Humans, not eras, are either boring or compelling

An interview with David Vseviov

by Toomas Kall

David Vseviov is a popular historian in Estonia – students know him as an erudite professor, while the general public knows him as an entertaining interpreter of his field. Every Sunday morning, thousands of people tune in to his radio lectures and their idiosyncratic, constantly shifting ratios of facts and humor – something he has been doing for twenty years straight. Now, the beloved professor has surprised the nation with his debut in fiction. Or is publishing an autobiography titled *Autobiography: The First Two Weeks* really fiction? Is it really an autobiography? In any case, readers have the freedom to decide what is fact and what is humorous fancy.

At the release of *Autobiography*, I asked you what great men like Benjamin Franklin, Sigmund Freud, Mahatma Gandhi, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Albert Schweitzer, Mark Twain, and David Vseviov have in common. Do you remember?

I think I said that they were all Jewish.

You were joking, but the "correct" answer I was looking for was that they are all men who have written an autobiography. How does it feel now that your own autobiography has been published and you stand among such an esteemed group of figures?

Luckily, it was you who placed me in such an esteemed group. If I'd done it myself, it would have seemed extremely unusual even as a joke, and someone might even wonder if I haven't got a screw loose. What's more, those authors have cast an autobiographical glance at a significantly longer period of their lives than the two first weeks I look at. I'm not even sure if my book is biographical at all, though some elements of the genre do appear.

More biographies are published in Estonia today than ever before. Rutt Hinrikus, who is the expert on Estonian biographies, has said: "Lately, it seems like every other Estonian is either the object or the subject of a biography." Weren't you hesitant to release your book into such an overburdened market? Weren't you afraid people would be dismayed and sigh, "*Another* one?"

There really are a lot in bookstores and more seem to appear almost weekly. It'd

DAVID VSEVIOV · PHOTO BY PIIA RUBER

be interesting to count how many autobiographical works have been published in Estonia over the last 20 years, for instance, and then calculate potentially how many "autobiography-worthy" people there are for every Estonian reader – which, as we know, total a scant one million. It's not impossible that we'd rank number one in the world in that index. Still, there is one criterium that would allow the result to be optimized, in a sense – you could leave out the books made in "collaboration", i.e. the ones written by "assistants" (journalists, etc.) Being aware of this and admitting that I'm not an "autobiographical personality" who might interest a wide range of the population, even in a country as small as Estonia, I had no intention of writing an autobiography as such. It simply turned out that way.

Perhaps it's also because 70 is a rather mature age that gives you the right to pen your life's story?

This book was written alongside other activities and over quite a long period of time, though the tempo did increase towards the end once my aims became clearer. At that point, I started skimming more purposefully through newspapers and magazines that were published in May and June of 1949, which enabled me to develop a kind of backdrop for the weeks following my birth. I didn't use it as a model per say, but Yuri Lotman and Jelena Pogosjan's book *High Society Dinners* had just been released in Estonian translation. Using lunch menus recorded by the Imperial Russian stable master Pavel Durnovo in 1857 and 1858, and newspapers from those years, the authors attempt to reconstruct possible dining table conversation topics. My approach was broadly similar. So, I can't actually answer the question, as I began and even finished working on my "life's story" a few months before turning 70. And right now, still at 70, I haven't decided yet whether the first two weeks should be followed by the third and the fourth, etc.

Since your *Autobiography* does focus on those first two weeks, it's understandable that most of the events take place in 1949. Does that time period – the late 1940s and early 1950s – intrigue you most as an historian?

History is, to me, something akin to what a laboratory might be to a chemist. It's a conceptual past-space; something used for "experimental" understanding. The present is more the cause of my interest. Let me give you an example. Many years ago, a colleague was promoted to a low-level managerial position, and I immediately noticed his gait change. That seemingly trivial observation turned my mind to more universal topics – what power does to a person, and a person to power. To seek an answer to that question, you can enter a "laboratory" – Imperial Rome, for instance – and see what the rulers of the time did with their essentially limitless power. Or, another example that has brought the Stalinist-era Soviet Union to my attention and is also topical from a contemporary standpoint: what developments lead to society being gripped by an epidemic of fear? How does this process unfold, and what tools does a regime use to achieve its desired outcome?

Have the most compelling points of Estonian history and your own life coincided during the last 70 years, or are you able to live in a way that's

DAVID VSEVIOV · PHOTO BY PIIA RUBER

compelling even at boring times? Alternately, can eras be divided into "compelling" and "boring" in the first place?

I, just like many others in my generation, have been lucky. Witnessing the bloodless restoration of the independence of a tiny border state is a great privilege that history offers to few. It would be a sin to complain. And it's people, rather – not eras – that can be split between boring and compelling.

In an interview, you said that three-quarters of *Autobiography* is fictional. In other words – it's prose more than it is an historical work. Maybe the proportion of fact is greater in other autobiographies, but how seriously can a historian take such works as source material in general?

The framework of events I present using press clippings from the time is indeed common in "history books". Everything else, however, is closer to fiction. At the same time, I suppose it's not possible to write prose that is absolutely unencumbered by the emotions experienced in the past. Perhaps the monkey lounging in a racy pose that was

embroidered on our neighbor Leida's pillow wasn't actually in my bedroom at night during the first few weeks of my life, but I'm certain I saw it by the age of three. At the same time, that fact is probably trivial to historians, unlike in the case of "real" autobiographies. Therefore, it's actually positive that there exists such a large number of them – they summarily form an entirely credible reflection of the past into the present.

When I read your manuscript, I suggested adding the subtitle "A Naïve Novel and Masterpiece of Late-Socialist Realism", but you didn't agree. Why not?

I might have been bothered most by ascribing the term "masterpiece" to myself. The notion of a "novel" also gave me some doubts. I had no problem with "naïve" and your other suggestions, by and large.

Do you have any favorite autobiographies? Or, if "favorite" is too strong a word, whose autobiography has been interesting to read lately?

I can't say I read them lately, but to answer your question, Stefan Zweig's *The World of Yesterday* and Vladimir Nabokov's *Speak, Memory* immediately come to mind.

Is there any chance that you'll write more fiction?

To be completely honest – I don't know.

Have you kept a diary or are you keeping one now? Have you saved any interesting correspondence? In other words: do there exist materials upon which you could construct a "true" autobiography that might satisfy serious and fact-curious readers as well?

I've never kept a diary or a journal or anything like that. There probably are a few potentially inspiring letters lying around somewhere. I can't rule out some of them having been sent by you. However, it's certainly not worth fearing that I might one day publish 'a "true" autobiography that might satisfy serious readers.' If anything, then another version similar to the autobiography of my first two weeks.

For nearly a hundred years – correct me if I'm wrong! – you've hosted the Estonian Public Broadcasting radio program "Mysterious Russia", and listeners are still tuning in. What matters more in the genre: the topic you discuss or how you discuss it?

If you want to round the number, then you should say I've been doing it for zero years, because 22 is closer to zero than 100. It is true, though, that the weekly program has been broadcast on Estonia's most popular radio station for 22 years already, and there have been altogether over one thousand episodes. I myself have no idea how it can be the case that I haven't missed a single Sunday and not one episode has been rerun in place of a new one.

Although "Russia" is an adhesive term for the program, the selection of specific topics has been quite broad and has touched upon other regions as well. For example, it was recently the 80th anniversary of the start of the Winter War, so the episodes focusing on the conflict inevitably expanded from Russia to Finland. Since there genuinely have been so many episodes and the topics

they cover range so widely, it's completely understandable that not all of them can be of equal interest to listeners. Feedback split into the extremes when I talked about Stalinist cinema: "Go into greater detail, please!" and "How long is this going to last?!" Still, these reactions are natural when you have an audience as large as mine. That being said, someone also wrote to tell me that they just finished listening to every episode for a second time.

DAVID VSEVIOV – THE LISTENERS' FAVOURITE · PHOTO BY HELLE RUDI / ERR

Do you present the "historical truth" in your lectures, or are you merely "approaching" truth?

I've attempted to present a variety of perspectives as much as I can. This is all the more important because a large part of my audience was forced to live for decades in a state where only a sole truth was valid. At the same time – and there's no avoiding it – every person, including me, has their own unique perspective. This also applies to assessments of past events. Although I've tried to refrain from forcing my own interpretation upon others, it always glimmers through in one place or another. This doesn't mean all my listeners share an identical understanding of everything I say, of course. A few years ago, I received a letter from a listener who accused me of glorifying Stalin, even though, as far as I can remember, it's been my objective to do the exact opposite all these years.

Do you have an exact idea of your average listener? The way you handle topics can't be too smart or too silly, can it?

"Smartness" can't quite be selected arbitrarily. I suppose one has as much as he was dealt – a truth that should apply to myself and my listeners alike. What we have is a 40-minute Sunday morning radio show that can in no way be an academic lecture, even though I've also dealt with very "difficult" topics. At the same time, you can't purposefully speak in a dumbed-down fashion. The only choice you have left is to rotate between topics and offer "lighter" slices of history as intermissions from the "heavier" ones. Like stories about the lives of people in Tsar Nicholas II's imperial court, for example.

Do you receive much fan mail? Do listeners argue with you, or just express their thanks and praise?

Quite a lot of letters have piled up over the years. Some have wanted to specify a fine detail. Returning to Nicholas II, for example, several Russian sources have claimed that none of the original Imperial train cars have been preserved. One listener refuted that claim. People have also requested specific topics. One appeal for me to focus on Byzantine history led to the broadcast of nearly 120 episodes on the Byzantine Empire.

DAVID VSEVIOV AND TOOMAS KALL · PHOTO BY PRIIT MÜRK / ERR

One hundred and twelve, to be exact. You mentioned it in your foreword to the 500-page book based on those episodes, which was titled *The Byzantine Emperors: Rulers in Purple* and published in 2004.

Yes, and I'm not sure any other radio station would have gotten away with something like that. Even more surprising was the fact that we didn't lose any listeners over the period. It's always nice to receive positive feedback. Recently, a well-known politician jogged past me in a park. Without taking off his headphones, he informed me that he listens to the show whenever he's working out. I quickened my own pace after that.

Do people in Estonia have an unusually heightened interest in history, or is it nearly the same in neighboring countries?

I doubt that an enthusiasm for history differs much between countries. First of all, everyone (at least adults) possesses some kind of an historical experience. History and medicine are rather similar, in that sense. They're fields in which all of us have some expertise. And another important point: it's safer to amuse yourself in the past than in the present. When you enter into the past, there's nothing preventing you from holding the hand of Catherine the Great, but in the present, it's very risky to approach any famous person in power with such an intention.

There are two opposing histories constantly "at play" in Estonia: that

of Estonians, according to which the country's annexation by the USSR in 1940 was a violent one, and Soviet history, which claims the annexation was voluntary. Is this kind of a split dangerous to society? Or is it simply the plurality of opinions true to a democracy?

Whenever there is discussion about steps taken by state entities (Estonia "voluntarily joined the USSR"), the fact that states are composed of people is frequently forgotten, for some reason. And there's no doubt that the majority of people living in Estonia had no desire to join the USSR in 1940 – which, of course, doesn't mean you couldn't find some individuals who saw joining Estonia's neighbor as something incredibly fortunate. Since this annexation was done contrary to the wishes of the majority, there's no way one can speak of free will. If we turn to look at the past – although the present can confirm it just as well – then how many examples can you find of nations that have voluntarily relinquished their national independence? We find countless more instances of the contrary, in any case – ones where a nation's sovereignty was put to a violent end. The fact that greater military force was not employed to liquidate the independence of Estonia and the other Baltic states does not mean it was done without violence. Sometimes, having a knife held to your throat is enough to make one submit to violence, too. Unfortunately, it's now an axiom that arguments have no effect on those "blinded by ideology".

The year 2019 was the 80th anniversary of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact and the beginning of World War II. Do these anniversaries make you anxious? By this, I mean you're the first historian that journalists usually think of, so they'll come to you for comments. Or, is being a pundit mainly a pleasant obligation?

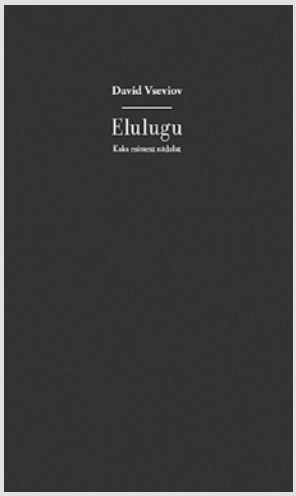
It depends. When someone comes to me for commentary and asks that I limit my response to 30 seconds (though I usually always ask how long I have), I try to get out of it. Occasionally – and this is due to how small Estonia is – I'm forced to accept, because the person asking is a close acquaintance and how can you say no to someone like that? I've had some fun with these commentaries, too. Although it remains a mystery to me why some people believe that if your profession is "historian", then you have every single piece of knowledge that has to do with the field of "history" right up your sleeve. I've been called and asked directly, on air, to explain to listeners the history of a company celebrating its centenary on that given day. I've come as a great disappointment to the person asking by replying that I have absolutely no idea.

DAVID VSEVIOV graduated with a degree in history from the University of Tartu in 1971 and acquired a PhD in the field in 2003. He has worked as a researcher at the Estonian Academy of Sciences' Institute of History and a professor at the Estonian Academy of Arts.

TOOMAS KALL is a humorist and dramaturge. He studied history together with Vseviov at the University of Tartu from 1966–1969.

Autobiography: The First Two Weeks

by David Vseviov
Excerpt translated by Adam Cullen



Autobiography: The First Two Weeks
by David Vseviov. Tuum, 2019.

WEEK ONE. DAY ONE.

May 27, 1949

When Aunt Mari (as she was called by some of her younger Estonian colleagues) was approaching the maternity ward of Tallinn Hospital No. 1, where she had worked as a senior nurse for almost two years already, a strong wind rose suddenly. This abrupt change in the weather caused Maria Ivanovna (as her few Russian-speaking colleagues more affectionately addressed her) to pause in momentary concern. Just before leaving home, she had hung out the previous evening's carefully washed laundry on the balcony—"for a breath of fresh air", as she liked to say. A strong gust could easily blow away one of Vassili's shirts (or, more embarrassingly, a pair of his underpants), even if only onto the Kukulovs' balcony downstairs.

It had already happened early in the spring, and in no way did Maria Ivanovna Sidorkina wish for a repeat of the trouble that had ensued; especially after last Sunday's early morning tribulations, when, startled by a loud pounding on the door, she'd opened it to find two uniformed men standing there. The policemen, as it turned out, had been summoned by Lena Kukulova from their station at the end of the street to this, the scene of the crime.

The relatively young policemen didn't appear especially determined in manner, but peering from behind them was an irate Kukulova, gesticulating wildly with loud threats of:

"Lock it up!"

Maria was completely nonplussed.

"Lock what up?" she asked in astonishment.

The taller of the policemen mumbled something indistinct and entered the room hesitantly. In truth, he didn't do so on his own initiative, but due to the downstairs neighbor's direct and forceful pressure. The second uniform—shorter and sporting a wiry moustache—followed.

"Lock it up!" Kukulova insisted.

Maria, who was still baffled by what was going on, repeated:

"What?"

"The cat!" Kukulova roared, growing increasingly infuriated.

"The cat," both officers mechanically echoed. "Where is it?"

"What cat?" Maria asked, instinctively backing towards the kitchen.

"*Your* flea-bitten cat! Murderer!" Kukulova screeched, having turned beet-red in the face. She seized the taller officer by the arm and, in a suddenly meek tone, implored:

"Arrest it."

She's about to collapse, warned Maria's professional inner voice, based on her nursing experience. But her neighbor had apparently gained strength from the physical contact with the policeman. Gritting her teeth, Kukulova approached, waving her fists threateningly.

"I'll kill it," she screamed, having lost every ounce of self-control.

Maria started to genuinely fear for her life, backing further and further away.

What cat?! was the sole thought throbbing in her mind. *She can't mean Barsik, can she?*

And what any of this had to do with her sister's cat Barsik, which she was taking care of for a couple of days, Maria still couldn't figure out. And was it really Barsik?

Maria was so worked up that she turned towards the policemen and informed them that Vassili had gone fishing—although no one had asked anything about him.

This mention of Vassili irritated Kukulova even more and she broke down into loud sobs, at which the shorter policeman nudged her towards the stool in the middle of Maria Ivanova's hallway. However, Lena Kukulova had no intention of sitting or of calming down. On the contrary—she straightened up and announced in an utterly tragic voice:

"He's off fishing while someone here is dying."

She then turned her back on Maria, planted her hands on her hips, and barked at the officers: "Arrest it! Or else …"

By that time, the neighbors from both adjacent apartments had crowded round the Sidorkins' open door—from #6 (two rooms shared by three spinster sisters) and #8, the single-room opposite, (recently occupied by the freckled saleswoman Linda, her three-year-old daughter Õie, and her mother). And later—after the early-morning events were behind her—Maria would for some reason remember the sisters' identical nightshirts. Perhaps because they were the color of gooseberries; the gooseberries Maria was too impatient to let ripen when she was a child.

The tension in the vicinity of Maria's apartment door peaked and who knows how the whole thing might have ended, if a loud shout from Kostya Kukulov hadn't echoed up from downstairs:

"Lenotchka, where are you?"

And then, a miracle occurred! Lena Kukulova sighed in relief, wrapped her arms around the shorter of the two policemen, planted a kiss on his cheek, exclaimed "He's alive!" and ran off.

Gradually regaining her composure, Maria still couldn't work out what had put Lena Kukulova in such a state. It hadn't, of course, been her first encounter with the downstairs neighbor, but she'd never seen Kukulova quite like that before.

Lena Kukulova's sudden departure didn't put an end to the story just yet. It didn't help that all the curious neighbors, who had by then squeezed into the Sidorkins' cramped hallway, had no intention of leaving the apartment just yet. Even the policemen, having collected themselves and adopted constabulary expressions, impressed as much more determined. Apparently, it occurred to them that even in the whirl of these events, it was their duty to keep a cool head and catch the culprit. Small matter that the victim had unexpectedly left the scene. So, the taller policeman took a couple of steps to occupy the place that had until just now been occupied by the arm-waving Lena Kukulova and demanded in a voice that precluded any arguing:

"Madam, where is your cat? We're taking it down to the station."

To which the shorter policeman added:"Until we clear all this up."

Now Maria finally realized that Barsik actually was the cat they were after, though what woes an adolescent feline might be able to inflict upon the Kukulovs remained a mystery to her. All that Maria could think of was that, while lounging in bed earlier that Sunday morning, Vassili had left and let Barsik out onto the balcony—"To birdwatch," as he said. She didn't think she had seen the cat since. Furthermore, Maria just now realized that in her rush to answer the insistent knocking, she had thrown on Vassili's pajama jacket, which was tight around the chest and barely covered the underwear she'd hurriedly pulled on. This realization made her blush and reach for the spare lab coat hanging on a peg in the hallway. She didn't manage to get it, though, because the taller policeman batted her hand away and demanded that she stop all her shenanigans.

"Fetch the cat; you can deal with your own things later," the shorter policeman chipped in.

Now Maria felt unwell. Luckily, the stool originally intended for Lena Kukulova was still there, so she sank down onto it, dabbing away the beads of sweat on her forehead with a sleeve.

Maria Ivanovna's momentary weakness brought several seconds of silence that were broken by a childishly frank question from Linda's daughter:

"Why is Auntie Mari wearing those odd undies?" Even though the question was in Estonian, which some of the neighbors (and apparently the policemen) didn't speak, this made Maria even worse. All she wanted was to flee her own apartment; to be done with a situation in which she'd been labelled a criminal and made a laughingstock.

Too bad that Maria's strength had deserted her. For the policemen, it was the reverse. The more time that passed, the more demanding they became. The shorter policeman had now seized the reins. He started forcibly shoving the neighbors outside and told Maria that they'd be waiting for her at the door in five minutes.

"With or without the cat," he said, adding ominously: "It's up to you which one of you will be locked up."

The Sidorkins' door hadn't yet fallen shut behind the last and most reluctant older sister to leave when Lena Kukulova shouted victoriously from downstairs:

"Got it!"

And just then, Maria Ivanova saw Kukulova's outstretched hands clutching a struggling Barsik, followed by the neighbor's face radiating utter triumph as she hurried up the stairs.

"Got it!" she repeated as she handed the cat to the taller policeman, who handed it over to his shorter colleague. At the same time, Linda's daughter Õie (whose name all the Russian-speakers in the building had difficulty pronouncing) announced that she wanted a cat, too, to which all three sisters smiled indulgently and replied in unison (a habit developed over a lifetime together) – you'll get one for your birthday.

Maria, who still hadn't risen from her stool, stared pleadingly at the policemen. A single thought was going round in her head: what would she tell her sister if they really did take Barsik away? What would happen? And all of their own accord, tears started streaming down her round cheeks…

"It won't happen again," she vowed in an instinctively pleading voice, and added just in case: "It won't happen again."

To which Lena Kukulova declared that one didn't *have* to be killed twice. The shorter policeman, who for some reason had lost his nerve again, asked:

"Who's been killed?"

"You have!" Kukulova snapped.

This in turn irritated the taller policeman, who advised her to think before she opened her mouth: "Otherwise, you'll be going with the cat."

With that, Lena Kukulova's nerves finally snapped. She began shrieking once again and all the rage that had so far been

DAVID VSEVIOV IN ABOUT 1951 · PHOTO BY LIIS TREIMANN PM/SCANPIX

directed at Maria now swung towards the policemen. The choice of words that Kukulova rained down on them suddenly turned the faces of the spinster sisters bright red. Even Linda, for whom vulgar Russian language was just foreign-language babble, remarked: "You should be ashamed of yourself!" To which the sisters added as one: "And in front of a child!" But the child herself was tickled pink, because the policeman had handed the cat over to her.

Now, the taller policeman raised his voice too. Looking threateningly into Lena Kukulova's eyes, he said:

"Citizen, enough of this hysteria! What's all this about the cat, anyway? This woman is sitting here calmly," he said, pointing to Maria, "while you're causing a scene."

"What do you mean, 'what's all this'?!" Kukulova roared. "It nearly killed Kostya!"

"A cat can't kill a person," Linda noted in a heavy Estonian accent, clarifying: "It's too small."

9+8

A conversation between poets Silvia Urgas and Karl Martin Sinijärv.

Karl Martin Sinijärv (b. 1971) made his debut in Estonian literature with the poetry collection *Threecircle* in 1989. Silvia Urgas's debut in the Estonian Population Registry was made in 1992, and her own first work was the poetry collection *Destination*, published in 2016. At *ELM*'s request, Urgas asked Sinijärv what was on his mind, and he inquired if there was anything she'd like to get off her chest in turn.

SU asks, KMS answers

Your first poetry collection was published in 1989, 31 years ago. A friend told me that you can only write poetry until the age of 30, and the thought has plagued me. By that standard, your first book would already be too old to write its own poems. That argument is obviously false – take you, for example – but how would you explain that to the person?

It's true that you can write a young person's poetry until about the age of 30. Still, adult poetry and old person's poetry don't have to be all that bad. Things can get comical when you do your damnedest to write the same kind of stuff as that which brought you fame and fortune in your earlier years. It's even more comical when you start rewriting the bold new speech you created back in the day. There are more than enough instances of both.

How do you feel that writing has changed for you over the course of your life? Do poems come to you differently than they used to?

I can't say that writing has changed. In technical terms, yes – rarely do I write anything longer than my signature by hand. Most of the time, I don't even have paper or a pen on me. But I'm always carrying my phone, so I can send myself an e-mail on the spot. The first thing I did when I was putting together my latest manuscript was look back through the e-mails I'd received from myself – they mostly contained poems or the beginnings of them. I suppose that, more often than not, I can't really be bothered to write down undeveloped poems. Some marinate in the back of my mind for a while and whichever way I write them down is generally the way they stay.

Have there ever been moments where you think – that's it, I've had enough of writing? How do you get through them?

SILVIA URGAS AND KARL MARTIN SINIJÄRV · PHOTO BY PIIA RUBER

Of course there have been. You get them with any addiction. Longer breaks, too. And giving up as well. Actually, by now, I've 'had it' all the time. Right up until I feel like I have something to say again. Or a way to say it.

Your poetry and collections seem to have some kind of a cipher or secret code known only to you. For instance, there are a lot of numbers in your titles, like 28, 39, and 0671. Are they coordinates leading to some kind of hidden treasure or the (subconscious) development of an individual mythology?

Well, that's easy. Some numbers ended up in the titles by pure chance through certain words (*Threecircle, Shadow and Five-Pointed Star, Four Hundred Languages*). *Towntown & 28* included a longer poetic cycle and 28 other poem-like pieces. The same logic led to *Artutart & 39*. Then, I realized the only numbers I hadn't used before in titles were 1, 6, 7, and 0. They would have resembled a meaningless year for me in that order, though, so I mixed them up and got 0671. A lot of people have thought I was conveying the month and year in which I was born, though I myself never came across it.

Have you written poetry in any language other than Estonian? Can an Estonian properly translate Estonian-language poetry or should

someone hoping to make it big abroad just leave the Estonian step out entirely?

Writing in other languages is a great trick for learning them – if you even know just a little bit, then go ahead and write. The likelihood of you producing poetry that's on any respectable level is near zero, but you'll certainly become more intimate with the language. Translating poetry is basically rewriting it or making something entirely new. So, if you end up finding a translator whose sense for the language harmonizes with yours, then anything is possible. Otherwise, there's not much of a point in translating it just for fun.

You've written poetry about many places – cities and streets – and have named people explicitly. Over the last few years, however, I haven't noticed poets readily naming their friends in their writing. If they do, then they usually compare themselves to others, and not always in a positive tone. Is the camaraderie gone from Estonian poetry? And are Estonian poets destined to only write about Tallinn and Tartu?

On the whole, poems are grounded in the moment they are born and I suppose the mind is gripped by the given places, people, and foods at that point in time. It's entirely possible that the inclusion of all sorts of relationships has declined a little in personal literature, who knows. I certainly don't agree that Estonians only write things that revolve around Tallinn and Tartu. Still, it's no wonder that those topics stick out more, given that the majority of writers live in those cities.

Have you always had a "day job" alongside writing poetry? Is doing something other than writing a constant limitation or actually inspiring?

I know of very few poets around the world who can get by on poetry alone. So, I've also held several different jobs over the last 30 years to make ends meet. It hasn't been boring. And it certainly hasn't gotten in the way of writing poetry or limiting anything. It simply means I haven't written any works of prose. I only want to write the kinds of things that I myself would readily read, too. That demands time and concentration. Maybe my stipulations for a good book have gotten too high?

How does a poem by Karl Martin Sinijärv come about in the year 2020? How does it come to you or you to it?

Like always. An idea gradually starts to dawn and glow and take shape in my mind and at some point, when I feel it's ready, I write it down. And they are ready, for the most part. Some of them do fade and never make it to the written stage, of course. Every now and then a practically finished piece suddenly appears out of nowhere – those are truly happy moments. So, I suppose words are able to line themselves up in secret without an author's direct intervention.

Could you make a cultural recommendation? It could be a book, movie, TV series, song, or even your best culinary experience.

As for Estonian prose that has spread somewhat in translation, I'd recommend two series: Indrek Hargla's *The Apothecary Melchior* books, seven of which have been

published to date, and Paavo Matsin's five novels starting from *Doctor Schwartz* through *Congo Tango*. In terms of newer cinema, I'd say *The Old Man Film*, which is a well-produced universal slapstick comedy. Music – I like everything that Erki Pärnoja is involved in and the new ethno-rock band Black Bread Gone Mad. My food recommendation is to find the potato salad that suits you best and don't forget the recipe.

KMS asks, SU answers

You write densely but not frequently. Meaning, you're not the type of author who churns out several collections a year or tosses everything you write into every platform possible as soon as it's written. When can we expect your next book?

I generally try to write when I have something to say. At the moment, there are more ideas than I can manage, and as a result I jump between different documents on my laptop without finishing any of them. It's definitely not a method I'd recommend to anyone in any field, but I hope I'll be able to clean up my chaos in the near future and hopefully it'll materialize as a book. I don't release everything I write immediately, most of it ages for a while before anyone else sees it.

Once, someone who had published a book with a friend cheerfully called themselves a writer in a newspaper article, and it stood out to me. At first, I thought: look at how the title of "author" has devalued. But then, I realized it's actually a highly prized status if people so dearly wish to adorn themselves in a writer's feathers. To what extent do you feel yourself a writer and how much do you feel like someone or something else?

When I graduated from university and realized that I couldn't call myself a student anymore, at least for a while, then my world collapsed for a bit. Being a student is such a great calling through which to define yourself. I don't often dare to call myself a lawyer as it seems like too big of a word, though I am one, in fact. It's also led to situations where people think I'm a secretary at work. It's the same with calling myself a writer, even though I've occasionally had to say it. In reality, I enjoy multitasking – having different roles in life (within reason) and not having to choose just one through which you can express yourself.

You've dealt a lot with copyright law in your education and as a lawyer. How does it seem to you at this point in time – is the copyright system in Estonia fine or is it outdated and more of a bother? Does it inhibit the free dissemination of the written word? We're likely to see some kinds of changes in the coming decades.

It's certainly not a bother, but Estonian copyright law dearly needs to be revamped and brought into line with the 21st century. Until then, it appears that real life makes adjustments just fine. In terms of the world and music, for instance, the issue of piracy improved dramatically with streaming fees and the illegal sampling problem was countered by moderately priced sample banks. All kinds of questions that involve monetary compensation like renting and the so-called

SILVIA URGAS AND KARL MARTIN SINIJÄRV · PHOTO BY PIIA RUBER

Estonian “empty-cassette” fees are waiting for a miracle, of course, but I think it’s a broader global problem where wealth is collected in the hands of just a few people and organizations.

How is Estonian literature doing, according to your taste and judgement? The number of people who natively speak and write in Estonia doesn’t even add up to the population of a smaller district of a larger city, but regardless, we’ve had something bubbling here for quite a long time. Do you find it interesting here?

There are so many good books published every year in Estonia that I’d never manage to read them all in my lifetime, but it’s unnerving to look at the bookstore sales charts and the more popular poetry groups on social media. First of all because of myself – I wonder if I really can’t understand what’s going on anymore – and second of all because of others. I wonder – can people really like all of that stuff? After I get all worked up, I have to calm myself down with the knowledge that taste is subjective and to each their own. It’s good to know that there do exist small community bookstores like Puänt in Tallinn and literary magazines like *Värske Rõhk*, but generally, it feels like there have been both much more interesting and boring times in Estonian literature than right now.

I don’t especially like to talk about influences and influencers, but I’ll just ask: what do you particularly like or are intrigued by in Estonia and/or world literature? And what’s particularly boring? What don’t you read at all?

At the moment, I'm reading Elena Ferrante's Neapolitan Novels, which are so thrilling that I feel physically sick when I finish one and don't have the next immediately on hand. My favorite Estonian author over the last few years has been Tammsaare. I read all of his books for the first time just a year and a half ago, and his goodness kind of gave me a little shock. My biggest find in terms of poetry lately has been the Macedonian author Nikola Madžirov. I try not to read any stiff or artificial books, nor art for art's sake, but I won't turn down any genre or style.

I could ask the same about world affairs – what floats your boat and what doesn't particularly sit well with you?

I sometimes feel like I'm just swept along with everyone's arguments in the big news stories, though I'm also deeply worried about the environment and the climate, and loathe many of the recent political developments in Estonia and around the world. Still, I'm already exhausted by the ridiculousness happening everywhere, so lately I've been falling behind the news cycle on purpose and am enjoying blissful procrastinated ignorance. I'd like to say that everything interests me, but I'm not a big fan of professional sports. Except for European football every two years.

Do you like cooking, and if so, then what?

I enjoy cooking, but only when I don't have to serve the food to anyone other than me. I get too stressed when cooking for someone else, especially because my favorite food is pasta with cheese and tomato, seasoned with a pinch of salt, and people generally think that if you're older than ten, then that kind of gastronomy is a little sad. I can happily make precisely two dishes for other people: beet risotto and vegan potato salad.

Are you happy?

What a question to end with so over-dramatically! Since I'm bad at small-talk, I'll say honestly that I'm more so than not on the whole, though I'm definitely not satisfied with everything about myself or my life. Still, if I were to make a list of the people, opportunities, and fortunate twists I've been given, I can only answer that I am. Compared to these, the little misfortunes my own head feeds me are completely trivial.

SILVIA URGAS AND KARL MARTIN SINIJÄRV

PORTRAIT OF KMS FROM HIS DEBUT COLLECTION *THREECIRCLE*, AND THE COVER OF THE BOOK, 1989.

Poetry by
Silvia Urgas and Karl Martin Sinijärv

Translated by Adam Cullen

Silvia Urgas

chrome firefox safari

I could recount
how curacao's longest bridge is called
"our swinging old lady"
and passing over the bay

you sure don't surpass yourself
but something along those lines
but
but I can't

I read about "our swinging old lady" in an article online
I've never been to curacao
although I used to be certain
I'd see every corner of the world
I no longer believe I will

when you wake up in the same place every morning
you don't even fill the corners of world bingo
sometimes I even doubt
I'll ever make it into space

so, settle for a description
of the sidewalks along tallinn's thoroughfares
on a weekday morning
you might think it's a dead city
judging by them alone
if people weren't
speeding past in buses and SUVs
judging by those alone you might think
I'm an exotic animal in a desert
others on safari watch from a safe distance

settle for a description of narva road
where no one can hear you
in measured cadence, I yell out at traffic
my credit card number and security code
at home that evening I check
again, not one purchase
no one cared

settle for a description of march
when the snow just falls and falls and falls and I can't breathe I'm too short buried in a snowdrift I push on and on and on and the tunnel behind me fills with snow again after every step my head hurts because the snow is too heavy I'm like an indigenous woman carrying a basket on my head but I'm carrying the snow of the entire city snow just falls and falls it's april can you settle for that description

can you settle

Karl Martin Sinijärv

It's pouring rain.
Who knows why or for whom.

Windows are fragile.
And yet: outside is outside
and inside is inside.

An in that is in
and an out that is out.
And who.

It's pouring,
problems are being solved.
Great summer might not end
in death;
great summer might not end at all.

What will skeletal autumn bring?

Now, rain was falling.
And a friend had long lived in another city.

I bought gum and a cool cider; the pub windows were foggy already that early morning.

Restrooms on the third floor.

Holy Moly, the blingablang of video ads
on the opposite street front suited well.
The sizzling Chinese duck fat sure made my mouth water.
Still.

Come here, friend.
Let us speak of this-day Estonia.

You only need one round to shoot an elk

An interview with Piret Jaaks

by Heidi Aadma

Piret Jaaks is a freelance playwright and dramaturge who, in addition to writing plays, has also penned short prose, children's books, film scripts, reviews, and articles, and has worked as a literary editor. Four of her theater works have placed in the Estonian Theater Agency's annual playwriting competition. Jaaks has likewise excelled in prose – in 2015, her first novel *Urban Legend* won the Betti Alver Award for Debut Literature. An alumnus of the University of Tartu, Drakadeemia, and the Estonian Academy of Music and Theater, she addresses topics such as women's position in society, mental health, and social norms. Jaaks's plays manifest a powerful, gripping *umwelt* that arrives at universalities that touch one on a personal level.

***Rites of Passage*, which is the 14th play you've written, won the 2019 Estonian Theater Agency's Playwriting Competition. Your 2011 play, *To See a Pink Elephant*, had the same fortune. What has changed since then?**

A great deal has changed for me, personally. With *To See a Pink Elephant*, my goal was to write an intense story about a married couple plagued by a secret, and to keep the dialogue as concise as I could. I dealt with my "favorite" topics like women's position in society, loneliness, and mental illness. Back then I didn't have the skills I do now, so I wrote the play in a plainly classical style. It has since been read and performed in several countries other than Estonia. You get an incredible boost of confidence to stay active in the field when your debut does as well as mine did. With *Rites of Passage*, my aim was to combine common mythology and folklore into an entirely different style. I wanted to write a contemporary play that is in communion with ancient stories, and to use various techniques in doing so. That's the challenge I set myself, and it appears to have worked.

You've been a dramaturge and have also directed plays. What kinds of opportunities or points of progress have you encountered?

In the autumn of 2019, I directed my play *Beautiful People* at the Tartu New Theater, which was an extraordinary learning opportunity. Only now do I fully comprehend the incredible responsibility shouldered by a dramaturge and how they can be the

PIRET JAAKS. PHOTO BY HEIKO KRUUSI / ÕHTULEHT

director's right-hand person in all their sundry roles: as a mirror of the play as a whole, in creating dynamics, as a dramaturge, etc. Many directors probably don't feel they need a dramaturge simply because they are unaware of the opportunities such cooperation can provide. The role isn't very well-established in the Estonian theater tradition just yet, but luckily, it's moving in that direction.

How do you see your role as a playwright in the staging process? Or do you view yourself more as a dramaturge?

I feel more like a playwright. During read-throughs, I would approach the directing process from the position of the author, making sure the world encoded in the script was preserved. At some point though, following the concept of the director, it's better to leave the position of author and rise to the next level; to seek a new idea – and here is where the dramaturge's role becomes crucial. I feel the author must remain the most autonomous of the trio. The director is responsible for the concept and the dramaturge must support it flexibly, but the author must be independent from their script. Once they hand it over to the director, it is the director's script. It's hard, but I believe the author shouldn't make too many compromises for theater, because otherwise no new value will take shape. I'm more of a hardheaded author myself. You do have to abide by the rules of theater, but it doesn't have to be a condition, because conformity can obstruct innovation.

You've written books, articles, and plays. What do you see as the most important inspiration for an author to write for theater?

A desire to write for theater is probably the same as what inspires people to act or to direct – a love for the art. It's as simple as that. Estonians are fed large portions of theater starting from childhood, and looking at national theater statistics, you can tell it's an important part of our culture – Estonia has a population of 1.3 million and in 2008, there were over 1.2 million theater tickets sold. I can remember my mother taking me to the puppet theater at every opportunity when I was a kid, even though we lived out in the countryside. I also remember how a theater troupe from Tallinn performed at the Kohila Gymnasium and the emotions it gave me. So, I'd say what's most important is having a love for theater and an understanding of how *alive* it is – of how the relationships on paper bring it to life. There's always incredible poetry and enchantment in seeing how the acting on stage materializes so powerfully and perceptibly in people; in the audience. It's enough for me to attend a premiere and just feel the energy in the auditorium. With books, it's great when fans write to you every now and then, or when people stop you on the street to tell you how powerful something was and how much they enjoyed it, but the great beauty of theater lies in its collective energy.

What else has influenced you when writing for theater?

Many things. Doing Live Action Role Play (LARP) in the early 2000s, for instance. The stories were usually pretty flexible and participants could develop their own characters. I can remember we made our own characters for everyone participating

and developed story lines, sometimes even giving them costume recommendations. I reckon it gave me a good foundation for building sound characters, because the ones we created were incredibly individual and had different goals, inclinations, and backgrounds. It's probably also where I got the desire and the ability to weave secrets into scripts, because many LARP plotlines are hidden – they have to be discovered and unwound.

A writer may have a well-honed imagination, but it won't show if they lack the skills necessary for writing a good play. In 2010, I came across the Drakadeemia creative writing school's open call to enroll in a playwriting course. We went through the basics of playwriting and learned what a writer's "toolbox" should be, as well as how to further sharpen our skills. I mastered advanced writing techniques during the course, which opened up a gigantic world of possibilities. I certainly can't leave out the fact that I also studied theater at the University of Tartu. We were required to attend many, many performances, because much of our four-year program was centered around what goes on in the theater – i.e. how to interpret and analyze, which has had an incredible effect on me.

Do you read plays as well?

I do, especially for inspiration. Every time I read a play, I discover something novel in how someone else has created that space, which leads to new possibilities for writing my own plays. It's a very enriching world. I taught a practical course in dramaturgy at the University of Tartu and selected a hefty stack of reading for the students. It's my conviction that if you don't read plays, then you won't be able to write them, either. A play is a different world entirely, with its own set of rules and methods. I tried to make the selection as broad as I could, including Heiner Müller's *Hamletmachine*, Eve Ensler's *The Vagina Monologues*, and Roland Schimmelpfennig's *The Golden Dragon*. Some great works of Estonian theater I picked were Siim Nurklik's *Am I Alive Now*, Andra Teede's *Estoplast*, and Madis Kõiv's *Return to Father*. Martin McDonagh's *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* was a well-made play I included to provide as rich of an understanding as possible. *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* and *Hamletmachine* are two wonderfully dissimilar scripts when juxtaposed. The former is particularly significant to me, personally. It is structurally classical, but absolutely amazing insomuch that it manages to tell a great story with minimal devices.

Where do you find the impulse to write?

Topics like isolation and loneliness in a community are especially dear to my heart. I also strive to create strong female characters because the Estonian theater tradition has been very male centric. The last time I felt like, "Now, I have to react as a writer!" was when I was working on my play *Can Animals Count?* (which received special mention in the 2019 Estonian Theater Agency's Playwriting Competition). When women doctors were declared mass murderers in multiple places around the world overnight, I started to think that if it's the women doctors today, then it'll be the scientists next, and then teachers will be declared unsuitable for their jobs, and that's how human rights like access to knowledge and education are restricted. That's when I

felt without a shred of doubt that I had to write a dystopia about what would happen in a similar future scenario. Music is also an impulse for me. In *To See a Pink Elephant*, I tried to write a play about a romantic relationship in which the woman is boxed into the man's world and can't escape. The right tonality and rhythm came to me from Arvo Pärt's music. Beethoven was playing in the background while I wrote *Beautiful People*. For *Rites of Passage*, on the other hand, it was a sentence that had just the right rhythm; one I later deleted. It stood alone on the first page of the play while I was writing: A chamber holds four rounds, but you only need one to shoot an elk. That leitmotif reminded me how I should move forward as I worked on the play. Once I determine the leading idea, I can advance confidently from start to finish.

You're currently working on a doctoral degree at the Estonian Academy of Music and Theater. Is it true that you wrote *Beautiful People*, which is also set against a backdrop of social issues, as a part of this process?

Yes, I was prompted by society. As a teenager in the 90s, I could sense that new values had formed in the winds of change. Everyone was similar under Soviet occupation – everyone wore the same clothes and had the same haircuts and enjoyed equally few opportunities. Afterward, you could just watch the social classes form. I realized something similar is happening with the spread of social media today. Some are more successful at showcasing their external side than others. An "influencer" culture has formed and moved onto the internet and social media. These two trends somehow clashed, and I tried to figure out what was behind it; to see if anything has changed. Underlying it, I found a really noteworthy dose of loneliness that people continually attempt to mask. So, I started writing the play as documentary theater. I interviewed people for whom appearances – anyone's appearances – were important. At some point, I realized the documental verbatim technique wasn't going to work, so I created a fantasy world based on the themes and impulses the interviewees gave me. My doctoral thesis focuses on community engagement in dramaturgy, in which I research how dramaturgy can take impulses from a community, and what writing strategies should be applied. I plan to broaden my field of experience and attend the Theater Academy in Helsinki as an exchange student for six months.

You've also written plays (*The Mumbler*, *Elias from the Ground*) and books (*The Mystery of the Vanished Sock*, *Mommy's Dragon*) for children. Do you find that there's a perceptional distinction?

Writing for children is completely different – it's more demanding, in a sense; more gleeful. Anything is allowed in a fantasy world. On the other hand, it's a challenge to hold a child's attention – you have to be able to understand how their thought process might work. I didn't get a hang of it before I became a mother myself. It's the dear little things that thrill children – insignificant everyday phenomena can swell into a huge play-world. It's been a fascinating journey to pursue and rediscover all these things. For example, my latest children's book *Mommy's Dragon* talks about how all kinds of different emotions can bubble inside of a mother, and how a child tries to

make sense of them. Unsure of whether she is the cause of her mother's emotions or vice versa, the protagonist decides there must be a dragon inside of mommy who doesn't like it when, say, a hole is cut into her dress! Kids have been profoundly delighted by the book and the energy they radiate is profoundly positive.

Are science fiction and also an alluring creative path?

My first short-story collection *Urban Legend* (winner of the 2015 Betti Alver Award for Debut Literature) had a few stories that could be classified as fantasy, and the genre certainly interests me. However, I also have great reverence for it. I feel like when we have trailblazers like Margaret Atwood and George Orwell, then where else is there to go?

To write fantasy, you have to have a tremendous imagination and also be capable of constructing that world in a way that speaks to people in our present day. In a way, a fantasy writer always forges a new reality by making predictions. I'm genuinely interested, I've tried my own hand at writing it, and I believe I'll try again. It might lean closer towards fantasy than to sci-fi – I especially admire the latter, which has an even greater danger of getting stuck in clichés. I'd like to constantly reach a new level of quality and be able to achieve uniqueness in my themes and angles of approach.

Unique drama – how would you define it?

A play must be like deep water that is composed of multiple layers – somewhere at the very bottom, there's an enigmatic mud. I have to sense that there's a great secret hidden in that mud. That it conceals a treasure. Once I do, I'm like a fish on a hook – I wriggle and wait to pass through the other layers. At the surface, you have an initial and immediate thinner perception before starting to dive deeper; before probing what kinds of intertextual references, style, and undercurrents lie there. It's exhilarating. In a good drama, much is hidden – you can read it and reread it several times and still discover something new. Listening to myself right now, I feel like it's not just a quality of a good play *(laughs)*. It's a quality of any good piece of writing. And an element of surprise. Secrecy and an element of surprise.

HEIDI AADMA is a drama researcher who graduated from the University of Tartu, and occasionally pens reviews. She has worked as a dramaturge at the Estonian Theater Agency since 2005. In addition to being responsible for the agency's playwriting competitions, she has organized theater seminars, trainings, discussions, and conferences.

Between Kross's roundpole fences

An interview with translators Frans van Nes and Jesse Niemeijer

by Johanna Ross

Six of Jaan Kross's novels have been translated into Dutch. The first to be published were *The Tsar's Madman* (translated by Roland Jonkers as *De gek van de Tsaar*, 1992) and *Professor Martens's Departure* (translated by Cornelius Hasselblatt and Marianne Vogel as *Het vertrek van professor Martens*, 1993). However, all of Kross's 21st-century Dutch translations have been translated by two men: Frans van Nes and Jesse Niemeijer. The latter did *Treading Air* (*Luchtfietsen*, 2008); the former, *Mesmer's Circle* (*De kring van Mesmer*, 2000) and *A Novel of Rakvere* (*Strijd om de stad*, 2019). Perhaps the most outstanding, however, is their jointly translated *Between Three Plagues* (*Tussen drie plagen*, 2018). Van Nes has also translated Meelis Friedenthal's *The Bees* (*De bijen*, 2015) and Niemeijer translated Andrus Kivirähk's *The Man Who Spoke Snakish* (*Die man die de taal van de slangen sprak*, 2015).

First of all, a couple of words about yourselves: is "translator" a central part of your identities? What other activities matter to you?

Frans van Nes: I work primarily as a translator, but I don't only translate literature and I don't only work from Estonian: I've studied Finno-Ugric languages and cultures, and also translate from Hungarian. I've also recently become a tour leader, but translating will remain my main job.

Jesse Niemeijer: Unlike Frans, I'm not translating full-time. It's not my profession, but something I enjoy doing every once in a while alongside my "regular" job – working as a crime analyst for the Dutch police force..

What is the position of translator generally like in Dutch culture?

FvN: I'm not sure it differs much from other countries. Translators are relatively invisible. You do strive to be invisible as you translate, but that noble principle results in the undervaluing and also underpaying of translators. Luckily, we have the Letterenfonds (the Dutch Foundation for Literature), which provides support for literary translators.

What language is most translated into Dutch, presently? I'd assume English, but what else?

FRANS VAN NES · PHOTO BY DMITRI KOTJUH

JN: The exact figures are hard to determine, but the vast majority is from English, of course. French is still probably in a distant second place. Scandinavian thrillers and crime novels are also relatively popular.

How did you first come across Jaan Kross, and how did you end up repeatedly translating his works?

FvN: Two of his novels had already been translated into Dutch by the time the Prometheus publishing house asked me to translate *Mesmer's Circle* in the late 90s. I'd already translated a few books from Hungarian. Cornelius Hasselblatt and Marianne Vogel, who had translated *Professor Martens's Departure* into Dutch, helped me a great deal with my first Kross translation, which was also my first translation from Estonian overall. Since then, my opportunities to translate more Kross come mainly from the fact that Prometheus has remained loyal to him. What publishers dare to release determines the fate of authors and translators.

JN: I became a translator purely by chance, and Kross's novel *Treading Air* was my very first literary translation. At the time, I was studying Russian and international relations at the University of Groningen and because I had worked as a volunteer

in Estonia and was interested in the country and the language, I took a minor course in Estonian language and history that was taught by professor Cornelius Hasselblatt. Around 2006, he asked me if I would be interested in translating *Treading Air* if he helped me out a bit, so I tried a few chapters and decided to give it a go.

Estonia is a small country and its literature isn't well known to Dutch publishers. Job Lisman at Prometheus is almost the only Dutch publisher who has a real interest in Estonian literature and is also open to suggestions. As Frans said – whatever the publisher wants is what goes, though you can always try to get one of them enthusiastic about a particular book. It certainly helps when the work is already available in another language and the publisher can read it. That's how Lisman gained an interest in *Between Three Plagues*, but also in *The Man Who Spoke Snakish*, which I translated into Dutch a few years ago.

How has the Dutch audience received Kross's works? The translations find themselves in an entirely new context, for the most part. Kross is important to Estonians as an historical interpreter and his books are seen as bolstering our sense of national identity. What does a Dutch reader find in them?

FvN: Kross has been very well received, meaning those who know about him give positive feedback. However, he's not widely known. Dutch readers see his books as a window to an unknown world.

JN: Six of Kross's novels have Dutch translations. *Between Three Plagues* was the most successful of them, both commercially and in terms of its reception by literary critics. The reviews in all major newspapers were ecstatic and the translation of *A Novel of Rakvere* was a direct outcome of its success.

Kross would have turned 100 this year – he's mostly a man of the last century. What do his works have to offer to people of the 21st century?

FvN: Much, I suppose. With his historical novels, Kross wanted to make a statement about Estonia in his own era – not just in the era he depicts, though their reach is even greater. Staying true to principles or not, speaking one's opinion or holding it back, man's relationship with power, the lasting effect of one's beginnings – the topics Kross addresses are topical everywhere and always, even today.

JN: Well, of course he is a writer from the last century, but the important themes in his novels are quite timeless. Frans named a few, but I'd like to add others and issues like: the nature of loyalty, to whom one is loyal, truth, treason, etc.

Do the works by Kross that you've translated seem similar to or unique from one another, be it in terms of style or how he approaches topics?

FvN: I believe they're more similar, both stylistically and in terms of content. The protagonists are also alike. On the other hand, the context and perspective are different every time.

JN: To be honest, I find it hard to compare the two novels I've translated because

JESSE NIEMEIJER · PHOTO BY DMITRI KOTJUH

Treading Air was my very first translation and was done almost 15 years ago. Still, I'd say his style of writing in both novels is typical Kross with very precisely formulated, long and winding sentences. The protagonists are both talented Estonian men who live in a time of foreign occupation and, in that sense, are comparable. However, they make different choices. Whereas Russow collaborates to a certain extent, Paerand does not.

Is there any Dutch author to whom you'd compare Kross? Or an author from any other cultural and linguistic space?

FvN: It's hard to find a Dutch comparison for Kross. During his time, there were the 'Three Giants' (Willem Frederik Hermans, Gerard Reve, and Harry Mulisch) but none of them are very comparable with Estonia's One Giant. From outside of the Netherlands, I'd propose the Albanian writer Ismail Kadare. He's also an author who speaks a great deal about his own time through historical novels, and whose characters likewise navigate between power and principles.

JN: I don't think we really have a comparable author in the Netherlands. My impression is that the historical novel genre is not so popular here. When I started translating *Treading Air*, Marianne Vogel and Cornelius Hasselblatt advised me to read some books by Nelleke Noordervliet because her themes and styles are a bit comparable to Kross. She is a relatively well-known Dutch author of historical novels,

but in no way is as popular or important as Kross is in Estonia.

***Between Three Plagues* is such a long novel that translating it must have been a real undertaking! How long did it take you?**

FvN: Two years in total, though with some breaks. We began translating it in early 2016 and sent our final corrections to the publisher in early 2018.

It's not only about volume, of course. The novel also uses very complex language that is partially due to a technique unique to Kross and partially due to a stylized language that mimics its era (the 16th century). How did you approach translating the archaic language? Does any corresponding layer exist in Dutch?

FvN: Sixteenth-century Dutch is actually a foreign language to modern-day readers. In some places, we used archaisms to create a 16th-century atmosphere. You can't go any further than that, though painting such an atmosphere might in fact be at the core of it. Translation is almost akin to faking. The characters aren't actually speaking Dutch and aren't thinking in Dutch. I might add that I translated passages from the chronicles directly from Low German and, because it's similar to Dutch, I changed only very little. I did the same when I was translating *A Novel of Rakvere* and the result is certainly close to the language spoken at that time.

Kross often uses uncommon words or even comes up with his own that can't be found in any dictionary. How did you resolve those types of situations?

JN: In my notes, I can see I marked down the Estonian words *noormehehakatus ehk poisivooster*. In short, that probably means it was a problem. In the Estonian dictionary, the first definition of *vooster* is '*looder, logask*', i.e. someone who is idle or a loafer. Thus, as I understand it, there is something of a judgement in the word *poisivooster*. I translated it as *kwajongen*, which also has the meaning of 'a young man', but one who is a bit naughty or something of a rascal. Looking back, I assume I believed the words that describe a person who is idle or a loafer are too strong in Dutch, and we also don't have one word that implies the person is young…

FvN: I translated *tulekurja lõhast* into one word: *vuurduivel*, or 'fire devil'. The word doesn't exist in the Dutch dictionary, but it contains both 'fire' and the nature of it. I don't remember why I chose that specifically, but I created quite many compound words – ones more bizarre than *vuurduivel*.

For a translator of Kross, it's a privilege that many of his words – even the most unique ones – can be found in the Estonian dictionary. Often, though, the description goes no farther than a reference to Kross (which means it probably hasn't been used anywhere other than in that particular spot in the work you're translating!), so the benefit is relative in that sense. Still, knowing that any given word is unique to the author alone is also important. I kept his German translations close the whole time I was translating the last two novels.

Can you remember any other expression or passage that was a really tough nut to crack? Did you ultimately find a good solution or did you just have

to settle for obscurely "translating between the lines"?

FvN: It wasn't always possible to use an archaism, neologism, or vernacular in the "right" place, meaning in the same place as in the original. In that case, I needed to find something new elsewhere – in a place where the language was actually transparent to an Estonian reader. *Adramaa* (a feudal unit of land measure) and *roigasaed* (a roundpole fence) are actually common words and not unique to Kross, but with these it was our turn to come up with something new: *ploegakker* is a neologism and *staakheining* is a rare word that was given a new, specific meaning.

The hardest sections to translate were the ones that spoke about language itself. In one place, I had to find an equivalent for a vernacular word for shed without having the Dutch reader think of a specific region in Belgium or the Netherlands instead of the one in Estonia. I settled upon a common word but gave it a new and incidental meaning.

JN: I just remembered that in Vol. 1 Chapter 3, they play a game in school called *putterloggi mäng*, or in German *Butterloch Spiel* – a medieval ball game. As far as I could discover, it isn't a game we're familiar with in the Netherlands or that was played here at that time. So, I had to search for a more or less comparable old game that was played in the 16th-century Netherlands. Having to suddenly delve deep into a subject you know nothing about is a charming, appealing side of translating literature. I came across an old Dutch ball game called *Kolf* and in my Dutch translation of *Between Three Plagues*, Balthasar plays that game.

Did you argue over anything while translating? How can a pair of people translate a book with such a difficult style in the first place? I suppose you can't simply divide it in half, can you?

FvN: There was a lot to coordinate, of course, and we also commented on each other's translations. There was hardly any real dispute. When you translate something as a pair, you have to always be ready to abandon your principles. As a general rule, if the other translator suggests an alternative, then it's recommended to pick that. That way, the translations mesh.

There are many theories of translation, but from what I've heard, translators mostly shrug them off in practice and just keep going as they were. Is there any theory of translation or simply a translator's creed that you hold dear? Did translating Kross put it to the test in any way?

FvN: I'm no theoretician, but I believe the practical summary of translating is an eternal question phrased by the poet and translator Martinus Nijhoff, whom the Netherlands' most prestigious translation award is named after: "In what kind of Dutch would a foreigner have written their book if they were Dutch and have relied upon in terms of their conceptual form?" One must always keep that question in mind. The quotation comes from Nijhoff's review of the Dutch translation of Eros the Slayer by Aino Kallas (Doodende liefde, 1929, translated by Herman Hana).

JN: Just like Frans, I'm no theoretician. Apart from a few courses on translating Russian literature, I also do not have much

Between three plagues by Jaan Kross. Translated into Dutch by Frans van Nes and Jesse Niemeijer.

formal education in literary translation. I think I learned the most while translating *The Man Who Spoke Snakish* in 2014, for which I received funding and practical help (a mentorship) from the Dutch Foundation for Literature. Since Frans was the only active translator from Estonian at that time, and was more experienced, he served as my mentor. He taught me many things, but most of all, I learned to be more precise. I remember him saying, "What is lost in your first version (or first 'working' translation) is most likely lost forever." I always have that sentence in the back of my mind when I'm translating. And, needless to say, it's a very important lesson when you're translating the work and the style of a writer like Jaan Kross.

What have you enjoyed most about reading and translating Kross? Has anything made you angry?

FvN: I enjoy the immense scope of his books. It's highly satisfying to delve into the incredible variety of things in his writing. Kross gives his reader the gift of an immense knowledge about the (cultural) history of Estonia and Europe, and his translator gets even more because they must "know the seam of the stocking", as we say in the Netherlands. It's very enriching, but the translator also has to give up sometimes. As soon as you've finally found one equivalent for a difficult word, Kross serves us up a synonym for the same word.

And, to be honest, he's downright unbearable at times – such as when he smugly displays himself through his own work. I especially remember that from my first Kross translation. The protagonist of *Mesmer's Circle* loves to write poetry. Poetry is very difficult to translate in and of itself, but when the author goes on to add that the poem turned out very well, he almost infuriates me. By translating that, I'm complimenting my own translation, and I don't like that! Let others do the praising.

JN: I enjoy the rich language Kross uses in his novels. And the way he's able to set the stage or paint the picture with it. Especially in *Between Three Plagues*, you can almost feel, smell, and touch medieval Tallinn when you read or translate the book. The downside is that his language is – because of that quality – sometimes very, very challenging.

JOHANNA ROSS (1985) is an editor of the Estonian philology journal *Keel ja Kirjandus* (Language and Literature). As a scholar, her main fields of interest include female and Soviet literature.

Jaan Kross – The Estonian ambassador

by Cornelius Hasselblatt

When Estonia gained independence in 1918, one of the first tasks of the new state was to tell the rest of the world that it exists. Diplomats went to the relevant European capitals to negotiate and lobby for the recognition of their country. Over a century later, Estonia may be called a well-known and established nation – and in 2020/2021 even a non-permanent member of the United Nations Security Council – but the fight for visibility remains a constant call. This is still one of the main tasks of the diplomatic staff of the country, as it is also for Estonia's arts and their export. The presentation of Estonian cultural manifestations abroad can support diplomatic staff. Certainly, the most successful examples are the music of Arvo Pärt (b 1935) and Veljo Tormis (1930-2017), but literature can also make a profound contribution.

Here, Jaan Kross (1920–2007) fits as one of the best examples, as he is also one of the best witnesses of this republic. He was born 17 days after the signing of the Tartu Peace Treaty, which can be regarded as the definitive birth certificate of Estonia. Kross was a law student at Tartu University when Estonia was occupied by Soviet troops in 1940 and survived the subsequent Nazi occupation (1941–1944) in different positions, although he was imprisoned for some months at the end of that occupation. He escaped when the Nazis fled the advancing Soviet army, only to be imprisoned again in 1946, when Stalin's grip on Estonia strengthened. The following eight years (which he spent in Soviet camps and in Siberian exile) were, of course, an irreplaceable loss of time, but at the same time an extraordinary study period: "Being able to investigate and interpret an incredible variety of people in situations that are completely atypical for them with all their changes and self-assertion under laboratory conditions" – as he ironically formulated it in a small autobiographical sketch in 1982. He returned to Estonia in 1954 and lived the following half century as a freelance writer in his native city of Tallinn. When he died in 2007, he left us 11 novels, 6 novellas, 26 short stories, 6 collections of verse, 6 collections of essays, 2 volumes of memoires, 2 plays and numerous translations and other texts.

Why choose Jaan Kross?

There are hundreds of other writers in Estonia, some of them having even published more books, but Jaan Kross certainly is the best known and the most translated Estonian author ever. What makes the oeuvre of this writer so exceptional? Why do we continuously reread his works? Why do new translations continue to appear?

There are surely as many answers as readers of Kross, because everyone has their own favourite. Yet, one thing should be beyond doubt: it is the specific mixture of the national (far from being nationalistic!) and the universal, which makes Kross interesting for readers abroad. For Jaan Kross, Estonia and the Estonians are the starting point for everything he writes. However, if you think that means – therefore – the work of Jaan Kross can only be understood with the necessary knowledge of the Estonian background, you are wrong. It is the other way round: the necessary knowledge about Estonia can be obtained by reading the work of Jaan Kross.

Reading Jaan Kross means, in addition to dealing with the general ethics questions of mankind, learning something new – and I guess that is what most readers want. It is not simply the style and intrigue we love when we read Gabriel García Márquez – we also want to learn something about South American societies. It's not only the moral issues that fascinate us with Nadine Gordimer's works, we also want to learn something about South African apartheid. With Toni Morrison, it is not only her fascinating characters that captivate us, but also her treatment of slavery and American history. We enjoy Orhan Pamuk not just due to the suspense of his books, but also because we read something about present-day Turkey. Herta Müller convinces us not only through her language, but also because we get insights into the totalitarian system in Romania – just to mention some examples and to confine myself to winners of the Nobel Prize. Jaan Kross does not belong to this last category, but many critics, colleagues and readers ranked him high for this award in the 1990s and the beginning of the 21st century.

For a great deal of his historical fiction, the prose of Jaan Kross covers the period of the early 16th century up to his own lifetime, the end of the 20th century. With the last period he left the realm of historical prose, but the transition is slight and almost en passant – as is the transition between fact and fiction, which can best be exemplified with the famous subtitle of his novel *Mesmer's Circle*, which runs: "Romanticized memoirs just like all memoirs and nearly every novel".

Starting in the 16th century

The earliest novella by Jaan Kross is set in 1506; *The Four Monologues on the Subject of Saint George* (1970) are small snapshots from the turn of the Middle Ages to modern times, in which the whole world of Kross's later oeuvre can be found. The scenery is Tallinn, and later, almost everything written by Kross takes place in Estonia. The milieu is the grey area between Germans and Estonians, which is another important feature of Krossian prose. A frequently returning subject is the conflict between adaptation and resistance, between uncompromising self-assertion and self-confident compromise. The main character in the

Four Monologues is Michael Sittow, a historical person who was born in Tallinn – probably in 1469 – and died there in 1525. In the meantime, however, he was in Europe, a student of Memling and later a painter at the Spanish court and in the Netherlands. Back in Tallinn for inheritance matters, he falls in love and decides to stay. At that time, he was already an established painter, but the local artists wanted to get rid of the unpleasant competitor. By rigidly adhering to their guild rules they demand a piece of practical work as proof of his skills. However, the famous painter complies with the requirements, disregards the humiliation and delivers a masterpiece so that he can stay in his homeland. In this concise narrative one can see that the prose of Jaan Kross is not about exotic small peoples in north-eastern Europa, but about general human problems and European cultural history.

This continues in the tetralogy *Between Three Plagues* (1970–1980) which one might call the *magnum opus* of the author – and not only because of its far over 1,000 pages. It is built up as a biographical novel of – probably Estonian born – Balthasar Russow (c. 1536-1600), a pastor at the Estonian Holy Spirit parish in Tallinn and author of the famous *Chronicle of Livonia* (1578, 1584). The first novel starts in the 1540s and ends in 1600, when the political conditions have fundamentally changed and medieval Livonia has vanished from the map. During the Livonian War, Northern Estonia becomes part of Sweden, the South comes under Polish rule, the islands are occupied by Denmark and Russia under Ivan the Terrible, who was a regular, but very feared visitor. The war is accompanied by various plague epidemics, occupations and peasant rebellions and among all that the pastor tries to write his chronicle, because he wants 'to tell the truth'. But what is the truth? Who (dis)likes it? How can the writer manage to survive? It immediately becomes clear that this problem is not restricted to the 16th century or to Estonia. What are the three plagues? The horrible conditions of those days? Perhaps the three European powers, Sweden, Poland and Russia, who are fighting for supremacy in the Baltic Sea region? Or war, hunger and disease? As Kross wrote this in the 20th century, maybe the plagues are Nazi-Germany, Stalin's Soviet Union and the Western Allies who abandoned Estonia (together with Latvia and Lithuania) after World War II. Maybe the word "between" is the most important of the three words of the title. Estonia and Estonians are always *between* someone and something.

The readers will decide, and they have plenty of time to think about it while they work through (and enjoy!) the extremely rich and baroque language of the author. Kross, who started as a poet, said in another context: "Rhymed verse is a voyage on a river, free verse on the sea". In this novel, one is inclined to say, a sea vessel escapes the waves and heads for heaven. Jaan Undusk characterized Kross's style in a homage from 2000, as follows: *You almost never simply write: "He sat down on the bed." You don't even write: "He sat down on the hide duvet cover of his marriage bed." For the most part, you write something along the lines of: "With a light squeak of the box spring, he sat down on the dog hide duvet cover of his marriage bed, already somewhat moth-eaten in its crevices."*

The following centuries

In his following novels, Kross continued to cover the Estonian centuries with various individuals, different approaches, and multiple plots. The *Novel of Rakvere* (1982) is situated in the 1760s and describes the struggle of the town's inhabitants for their own rights, which date back to the 13th century. Jaan Kross's best known novel, *The Czar's Madman* (1978), is situated in the 18th century. Here, for the first and only time the main character is not Estonian, but the Baltic German nobleman Timotheus von Bock (1787-1836). He was a confidant of Russian Czar Alexander I and had promised to always tell him the truth. Yet, eventually, the Czar could not bear the truth anymore and von Bock was detained, isolated and tortured. For years he disappeared from the scene before he was officially declared crazy and could spend his last years relatively free on his Estonian estate. Finally, however, von Bock decides to escape with his wife and child to Western Europe. However, when they go to enter the hired ship in Pärnu, von Bock withdraws: "I cannot go ... Only those who want to take revenge go abroad ... If you want something more important, stay at home ... – this is my battle – with the Czar, with the Czarist Empire, with what we have – ... No, no, if you leave already, then not to Switzerland. Then to," he pointed into the darkness behind the windows, "to Irkutsk and further, where the others already are, for me the only possibility to be is where I am forced to be! To be there – like an iron nail in the flesh of the Czarist Empire..." (p. 268-269). This is a confession: flight would have been surrender and subordination. To stay home is an uncompromising protest, a disturbing and stubborn presence that is so unwelcome to the rulers.

The next large novel, *Professor Martens' Departure* (1984), takes place at the turn of the 19th century to the 20th century and displays an Estonian born jurist who made a diplomatic career in the Russian government – this was the only possibility as there was no such thing as "Estonian diplomacy". Nevertheless, the protagonist tries to enlighten a journalist who asked him during the peace negotiations between Russia and Japan in 1905 in Portsmouth: "But you as Russian by origin – Oh, you're not Russian? Well, you as a German, isn't it – oh, you're not German? Who are you then? Pardon me? Eskimo? No? Estonian? What kind of people is that?" This subtle passage says everything of being Estonian and finding a position in the world.

The author's own history

The beginning of the 20th century has been topicalized in the novel *Elusiveness* (1993), displaying two Estonians at the beginning of a (great?) career, which abruptly is ended by German executioners. Jüri Vilms (1889–1918), one of the founding fathers of Estonia, was murdered by German troops in Helsinki, his biographer Aleksander Looring (1910-1942) faced the same fate in Nazi occupied Estonia. In the 1920s and 1930s, Estonian born Bernhard Schmidt is also featured in the novel *Sailing Against the Wind* (1987). The 1930s are covered by the beginning of *Treading Air* (1998), a novel about Estonia's struggle to survive in the 20th century, and by *The Wikman boys* (1988), a picture of the first generation of republic born Estonians finishing school in the years 1937 and 1938. This generation faced the surrender of 'their' republic in the novel *Mesmer's Circle* (1995), which centers on the where the tumultuous years of 1940 and 1941.

JAAN KROSS IN EXILE IN ABAN, 1953 · PHOTO BY HELGA KROSS

Numerous short stories provide details about the post-war times and the years spent in imprisonment and banishment, followed by an entire novel about the first year back home in Estonia: *Excavations* (1990) is a picture of Estonia in 1954, one year after the death of Stalin. Finally, there is *Tahtamaa* (2001), the novel over recently freed Estonia in 1993/1994, when exile Estonians show up in Estonia and try to make a fortune.

In all his works, Kross plays with the possibilities of history, making a tightrope walk between historical truth and historical probability. If a thing is proven to be a historical fact, Kross would never dare to ignore it. Yet, as soon as something cannot be fully proven, the author's imagination rushes on. Thus, literature can provide explanations for things we don't know for sure. Perhaps even as an explanation for why Estonia exists at all. Reading Jaan Kross, we understand the phenomenon, as most of his Estonian heroes know how to stay alive and avoid direct confrontation. Like Estonia. In this respect, Jaan Kross is a real ambassador of his country, as his novels bring Estonia to the rest of the world. The message is universal, but the packaging is Estonian.

CORNELIUS HASSELBLATT held the Chair of Finno-Ugric languages and cultures at the University of Groningen from 1998 to 2014. He wrote numerous articles and books on Estonian literature and translated the works of more than thirty authors from Estonian into German.

Memories of Jaan Kross –

by Mati Sirkel, Maima Grīnberga and Tiina Ann Kirss

A speech by Mati Sirkel on Jaan Kross's 80th birthday celebration at the Estonian Drama Theater, 2000

Honorable Jaan!

If you would allow me to employ a metaphor while representing the Estonian Writers' Union, then I'd like to say a couple words about Kross as a cognac.

You were given the opportunity to grow and mature on a relatively sunny slope for twenty years. Then came the violent harvest; the winepress. Let us not mention the juice that was maliciously dumped and spoiled. Depending on the variety of grape, as well as the weather conditions and other circumstances ranging from chance to fortune, the outcome was to be either wine, vinegar, grappa made from pomace, or the ingredients needed for cognac spirits. The latter then passed through copper pipes and was distilled, giving it strength. And what strength it achieved! Next, the distilled product was transferred to oak casks to age. This phrasing also contains an historical and biographical reference: Kross's first "test blend" in 1958 was titled *Söerikastaja – The Coal Enricher*. And it had a fine taste. The oaky sublimation continued and from a certain blend, it became clear that the writing was of V.S.O.P. class. Through the year 1991, your writing helped us Estonians counter particular woes regarding our spirit and self-preservation.

The end result is a fully matured, high-grade product that you have bottled for us. Thanks to the translators in this auditorium, it has also spread to the rest of the world in so many vintages, with so many V.S.O.P. nuances, which Estonia has taken to capture a strong position on the world stage in the field of literary cognacs. Honorable Jaan, in the name of your union, allow me to thank you for all you have done and wish you continued delicacy in your true field.

What you have created is timeless.

Memories of Jaan Kross
by Maima Grīnberga

I have to admit that we could still use a few more translations of Kross's works in Latvian. Close to a dozen poems (translated by Astrid Ivask and Laimonis Kamara), the short-story collection *Under Clio's Gaze* (1978, translated by Džuljeta Plakidis and Anna Žīgure), a couple of novellas (translated by Rūta Karma for a periodical), and an excerpt from the story *Skystone* (1981) have been published in Latvian translation. Not one of Kross's novels could be read in the language until 1999 – thus, I had the joy and demanding task of translating four of his works: *The Czar's Madman* (1999), *Treading Air* (2002), *Professor Martens' Departure* (2011), and *Between Three Plagues* (2012). I was unbelievably fortunate to have the opportunity to undertake these works as a translator, though I still regret the fact that Kross's novels were not translated immediately after they were published in Estonian. They were long overdue. I can only imagine the effect a Latvian translation of *The Czar's Madman* would have had in 1980, for example, and how it would have accelerated the translation of his other works, in addition to amplifying his fame and foreign reception. Without a doubt, there wouldn't be a single work by Kross still to be translated today. Only now, in the early 20th century, has Kross been made available for the enjoyment of a scant few readers in Latvian translation – just like most truly high-grade literature.

My acquaintanceship with Kross was neither long nor extensive. I can remember neither how nor when we first met (probably while translating *The Czar's Madman*), but I do know I interviewed him in Tallinn's Old Town in 1999. I also enjoyed Kross's and his wife Ellen Niit's hospitality at their house in Kassari on the island of Hiiumaa, and spoke at his academic seminars. Our final meeting took place in 2006 – probably in March – when I visited him with the Latvian author Inese Zander, who was conducting an extensive interview for the magazine *Rīgas Laiks*. It was published in June of that year as "The Third Cognac".

I recently translated Kross's poetry collection *The Discovery of the World* into Latvian to mark the 100th anniversary of his birth. It will be published in the 1/2020 issue of *Domuzīme*.

Remembering Jaan
by Tiina Ann Kirss

In 1989 – late spring, if I remember correctly – my Toronto friends mentioned in passing that when visiting Ellen Niit, one should bring her ground cinnamon for the apple pie you'll get to enjoy. When I asked what to bring Jaan Kross, my friends were silent. I didn't even expect to meet Kross on that first trip: he already hosted so many foreign guests that Toomas Hendrik Ilves, who would become Estonia's president only seven years later, called them "safari Estonians" in a since extinct Estonian-diaspora publication titled '*Põrp!*'. So, I packed two jars of ground cinnamon in my suitcase.

I'd written a long essay during a seminar on Kross's masterpiece *Between Three Plagues* during the first semester of my doctorate in comparative literature, in January 1985. Teaching the seminar was a University of Michigan Ann Arbor professor, who had

been exiled from Poland in 1968, and for whom the topic of "literature and history" was conceptually broad and theoretically fascinating. The trajectory of the professor's research had led to the oldest known piece of literature – to the epic of Gilgamesh. Clay and stylus. It didn't take much convincing for an Eastern European to understand the phenomenon that was Kross, and that professor later became my doctoral advisor.

The main sources for my seminar project were the first two volumes of *Between Three Plagues*, which had been published in the West and certainly had not been in my parents' personal library (how, why, and to what extent Kross was respected among the Estonian diaspora in North America can be read about in the second volume of his memoirs, *Dear Fellow Travelers*, p. 250). The third and fourth volumes were harder to come by, as I lacked a stable connection to Estonia. I still have the bound photocopies I printed – with as narrow a margin as possible – for ten cents per page in a basement-level shop near the University of Toronto. The copies of *Looming,* the Estonian literary magazine I used, belonged to my friend Valli Naelapeal, from the Estonian Foundation of Canada's *Metsaülikool* ("The Forest University").

Kross, whom I did manage to meet in Tallinn, late in the summer of 1989, warmly invited me to participate in a German-language seminar on his novel *The Czar's Madman*, which was held in Loccum, Northern Germany that November. The Berlin Wall fell just a couple days after I returned. The only memories more vivid than Kross's 70th birthday celebrations in February 1990, are those of greeting Cornelius Hasselblatt at the Port of Tallinn after he arrived on the same ferry as I – barely able to tell day and night apart. Deep conversations and friendships formed with Kross and Niit.

After I'd defended my doctoral thesis, two chapters of which covered Kross's works, I was still tempted to write something longer about him. As I wasn't satisfied with the existing "*Leben und Werk*" models, and especially since the rings of reach expanded for Kross's work with almost every year, I decided – consciously or not – to delay writing it until I could have another long-overdue and more in-depth conversation with Kross himself. I discussed the idea of a book with Kross and Niit in the summer of 2004. That same autumn, working as a visiting professor at the University of Tartu and co-instructing a course on the ethical dilemmas in Kross's works together with professor Margit Sutrop, I was finally able to set the rhythm for a longer dialogue. By then, the first volume of *Dear Fellow Travelers* had already been published, as was a collection of lectures he had given as a liberal arts professor at the University of Tartu, titled *Autobiographism and Subtext*. I'd become intuitively familiar with the concept of subtext through my studies of literary theory, but I believe Kross brought "autobiographism" into discourse in Estonia through his generous and even self-evident use of the term when translating into Estonian the essays of the prominent Yale University literary theorist Paul de Man. I realized that with his memoirs and this collection of lectures, Kross had cleverly handed his readers (and particularly his researchers) a keychain holding several keys that fit no known lock.

My weekly conversations with Jaan and Ellen during the 2004–2005 academic

year evolved into a friendly ritual. I would bring along a digital recorder that sometimes didn't work or simply hadn't been charged well enough because of my forgetfulness. Hurrying across Tartu's Town Hall Square one snowy day, I remembered to buy a pair of wool socks, as I'd forgotten mine at home and it was cold on the bus between Tallinn and Tartu. On the way, I managed to formulate a couple of questions that had crossed my mind during some intensive reading over the last week. Although Kross's memoirs did have their unusual draw, I was much more interested in a quality of his works that, during the last couple times we met, he himself defined as "serendipitousness". Once the idea had manifested and I knew what to ask a few good friends, the ensuing connections came together with astonishing confidence. This pattern repeated in spite of the very different topics that branched off historically. To this day, I can still remember that glint of audacity in Kross's blue eyes. The corners of his eyes glittered all the more cunningly as he gently claimed that he hadn't saved any correspondence… to which Ellen smartly added as should be done with every letter you receive.

After chatting for a couple of hours, I was invited to join them for lunch with a few close family members and some former students. As I can remember, they were all modest, red-cheeked youth. When lunch was over, I spent another hour or so in Jaan and Ellen's company before boarding my bus and writing down notes for the next session in the dusky light. It could take a few more weeks for me to listen to the recordings.

My final memories from my conversations with Kross are mixed with the requests for obituaries that some Estonian publications asked for even weeks before he passed away. On the day he passed beneath Johann Köler's incredible apse painting in Tallinn's *Kaarli kirik* (Charles's Church), embarking on his eternal journey, a wintery sun shone above the city.

MATI SIRKEL is an Estonian man of letters and a translator. He was Chairman of the Board of the Estonian Writers' Union in the period 1995–2004.

MAIMA GRĪNBERGA is a Latvian translator who has translated the works of many Estonian authors into Latvian, including among others Jaan Kross, Andrus Kivirähk, Kristiina Ehin, Aidi Vallik, Sass Henno, Jaan Undusk and Maimu Berg. In 2013 she was awarded the Estonian-Latvian/Latvian-Estonian translation prize for her translation of the novel 'Between Three Plagues' by Jaan Kross.

TIINA ANN KIRSS is an internationally-acclaimed literary scholar who has taught at the University of Tartu, Tallinn University, and the University of Toronto. Her leisure activities include knitting and spinning wool, as well as *tai chi*.

Confronting silence with literature

An interview with Kätlin Kaldmaa

by Igor Kotjuh

Kätlin Kaldmaa is a universal literary figure who does – and achieves – many things. She is an award-winning poet, a prose writer, children's author, translator, editor, organiser of literary events, writer, exporter of Estonian literature and importer of foreign literature, someone who presents her own creative work and that of others, a teacher and mentor to authors, the international secretary of the worldwide association of writers PEN International, and someone who speaks out for and defends imprisoned writers and female authors.

What inspires you to try out different literary genres? Is it a kind of personal challenge? Is it no longer possible for authors nowadays to just stay quietly holed up in their studies writing?

To my mind, there are no boundaries in literature. Every subject needs a form and shape of its own. What I write comes from within and without at the same time. The only creative control I have is to give it time, and I've been able to do that in recent years.

I would like the world to be a better place. That sounds banal, I know. For me, it means first and foremost giving a voice to those who don't have one. There are almost equal numbers of men and women in the world, but even so you don't hear or see or read much from women. I always stand up for girls and books. This spring, for example, we started the PEN/VIDA Count to monitor disparities in literature across the globe. There are no figures on it.

Which of your activities is particularly close to your heart?

Literature is closest to my heart. With literature you can confront silence. I see – and not just in Estonia – that girls and LGBT+ individuals have the least say in the world. Women and girls are not a minority; however, they have been marginalised throughout literary history. So I'm very

KÄTLIN KALDMAA · PHOTO BY KAROLIINA KAGOVERE

keen to act on that, and give girls the courage to express themselves and the skills to do it. The children of today can change the world of tomorrow, and the surest way of doing that is to give a voice to the girls of today. I want to do that both in my books and in my other work.

To me as a person, freedom is the most important thing.

The way you live and communicate, your lectures and your books all show that you're an international writer. Would cherishing your roots (such as: taking part in Song Celebrations, having a place in the countryside, preferring Estonian products, etc.) make you a different kind of writer?

All of us are formed by our experiences. To be honest, I've never really understood this idea about roots. I spent the first eighteen years of my life on a Soviet kolkhoz. It was a hard-working rural lifestyle along the lines of Tammsaare's social epic *Truth and Justice* where the children basically did as much work as the adults from early childhood onwards and in the summer we worked at least eight hours a day in sugar beet fields or making hay, and then several hours in the evening minding the animals. In the evening, two of us three children would help our parents look after the animals, but every third evening you could stay at home and read, it was a great time, a real break, home alone.

My mother worked on a tractor for fifteen years and my father managed all the barns

in the kolkhoz, so I have a very precise idea of what rural life was really like. Besides hard work, there was time for reading books in the evening and beyond that there wasn't very much at all. And all that physical work means that someone who has lived in the countryside for 60 years is a completely different being from someone who's lived in a city for 60 years. Living in the countryside and getting by has never been fun. Particularly in earlier times of course, now you see more and more of those enormous enclosed lawns with robot lawn mowers. The world's most invasive species (whose success is based on being cute) is the cat, and the most widely-spread plant is grass, and they're both harmful for the environment.

So I don't really take the idea of roots too seriously. I've never been to Estonian Song and Dance Celebration. I did move back to the countryside after many years of living in the big wide world, not to the central eastern part of Estonia of my childhood though, but to North Estonia, by the sea, where there's moss instead of grass and the winters are surprisingly mild.

Ever since I was a child I've wanted to see the world and experience different cultures, and I've had that opportunity. Those experiences taught me that Europe is my home. The title of my next poetry collection translates as *My Wings are My Roots* ('Mu tiivad on mu juured'). That's true for now. Whether it'll still be true in five years' time I can't say.

You've said that you moved to North Estonia, by the sea. It feels as if your daily life and creative work is response to the call of *Thálassa, Thálassa*.

Water, the sea and the ocean are among the themes of your books. Why are you so fascinated by large bodies of water?

Thálassa, *thálassa* really does have a big influence on my creative work. In terms of the word itself, *thálassa* just means the Mediterranean, which I encountered in Greece. For me, Greece is *thálassa* first and foremost. The origin of the word is unknown, it existed even before Ancient Greek did. Like *thálassa* itself. In Iceland the ocean is something completely different – a big frozen water mass, solid with ice in winter. I can't deal with the Baltic Sea. It's too cold for swimming, the fish have too much lead in them; I'm still trying to work out a view on it right now. Water can be so different, even though it's all one and the same.

Water always takes the form of a container. Water always seeks balance. Water is life. Water supports me. In Greece I swim so much that my friends often ask to see my hands, to see whether I'm developing webbed fingers from so much swimming.

Thálassa is. Did you know that when the Mediterranean was formed, the African elephants were trapped on a tiny island and they evolved into mini elephants there?

I enjoyed your novel *No Butterflies in Iceland* ('Islandil ei ole liblikaid') which was open to numerous interpretations. It's an extremely rich and varied work, dealing with people and nature, power and society, men and women, tradition and innovation, among other things. It's been translated into several languages. What

interests me though is how this great book was received.

What's interesting is that the reception of the novel has gone from one extreme to another. In Estonia it's been more lukewarm than in other countries. That might also be because the mythological undercurrents of the book aren't so easy to recognize – motifs from the Bible, the Odyssey and the Icelandic sagas.

No Butterflies in Iceland is the story of a woman across the 20th century and I decided to set it in Iceland because I was looking for somewhere where a woman could develop and change without the paralysing impact of the Second World War. Having read all those stories of Odysseus, who spent decades roaming the world and waging war, I wanted to know what the women were doing while the men were away. They had all the responsibility for keeping daily life going. How did they manage? How did they feel? There are only a few lines about Penelope in the Odyssey, after all. It's not a book about Iceland, Iceland is just the place where the characters live. Even so, as a result of reading this book, several dozen people from Estonia and Finland have gone to Iceland and stayed there, and some of them more than once, so I've given the Icelandic economy a boost.

What do you feel is missing from Estonian literature? And what can our literature particularly offer to readers elsewhere?

Most of all I feel that women's voices are missing from Estonian literature. That should be encouraged more. On an international level, poetry is really strong here, particularly by female writers, who have a wide range and power, but there's simply less prose. There have been some voices that filled me with hope, but somehow they've faded away. Of course, women authors get a lot of harsh criticism; it's not easy. You need to have a thick skin. So that's what I'm waiting for, more prose written by women. And films made by women.

What do you think about the fact that a significant proportion of Estonian literature is in the hands of women? For example, the National Library, Tallinn Central Library, the Cultural Endowment of Estonia, the Estonian Literature Centre, the Estonian Children's Literature Centre, the Tallinn Literary Centre, various people at the Ministry of Culture – I could go on – are mainly led by women.

It's like that everywhere, not just in Estonia. I go to book fairs a lot and meet booksellers and people from literary centres and agents, and five out of six of them are always women. Men sell footballers and Formula 1 drivers to other men. The higher up you go in the literature world and the larger the structures, the more men you find, and above all they want to publish men's books, and they spend phenomenal amounts on advertising. In that respect Estonia's pretty good, women have the power to make decisions and also own publishing houses. At the same time, it's mostly men making the higher-up decisions at the major publishers.

And speaking of Estonian writers and literature, ever since we regained independence less than 30% of all the cultural endowment prizes have gone to women writers, and

even less in the first two decades of this century. Books by women authors are reviewed less and noticeably later. This spring we're hoping to update the PEN/VIDA figures for Estonia to see exactly how this is reflected in the statistics. A couple of years ago we did our first count. Equality is still a long way off, unfortunately.

Your prose poem / collection of miniatures is now underway, which might be something of a(nother!) surprise to Estonian readers. In this book, you express your love for the places and people you've grown close to in rural Greece and Iceland. Could you explain how villages in Greece and Iceland have become so important, like another home, to you, someone born in Estonia?

Europe is my home and the most important triangle in my life is between Iceland, Greece and Estonia. The book is a declaration of love to my villages in Iceland and Greece, miniatures from life. I could call them travel miniatures of course, there are those as well, the world in miniature, that's something for another book, but Iceland and Greece and the people there are my home. I could talk forever about both places. Iceland came first, I've loved the island ever since my mother told me stories of it when I was a child, even though she'd never been there herself. One invitation I'll never forget was "Come here and let's be happy together". In Iceland, everyone is cared for and appreciated, everyone's valued.

Not to mention the stories and uninterrupted time that have helped me connect with Estonian time and stories. My village and the world's stories. Estonian culture has been interrupted more than once and so much has been lost as a result. It really hurts me that every now and then, someone tells us again that we should forget the Soviet era. No, we can't, we mustn't forget it, it's part of our story, we can't erase it. It was fifty years. That time lives on in all of us and instead of forgetting, we need to talk about it, write about it. What's particularly awful is when literary history tries to link Soviet-era literature to the trends or form of Western literature during the same period. It's borderline violence. Absolutely terrible.

My Greek village is beside the *thálassa*. I've not gotten as far as the mountains of mainland Greece. Every island has its own story, its own dances, its own songs, there's an enormous cultural wealth. Although I lived in a city for more than twenty years, I'm still a country person at heart, someone who always worries about the right time to harvest crops and whether a rainstorm is about to happen. When a tomato grows between the rocks and ripens in the sun, it feels like a small miracle to me. We had to start heating the greenhouse in March in order to get tomatoes in July. And always *thálassa*, *thálassa*, *thálassa*.

IGOR KOTJUH is an Estonian poet, journalist, essayist and translator, and a member of PEN Estonia.

Maths

by Kätlin Kaldmaa

My grandmother is two and a half times younger than I
My mother is twenty six years older than I
And yet my mother has always missed
that war-skinny girl
who died before my mother knew how to say “Mother”

I know how to say “Mother” and how to swim
into the cave through secret entrance. I know how to say “Mother”
in ten languages and my poems
that are because of my mother because of my grandmother
have been translated into thirty three languages
My poems have outlived
my grandma
and with every year I’m moving farther away
from that girl from Uue-Kariste
and with every year I’m moving closer to her

I hope she became a tree
even if only at the graveyard
If not a tree than a bloom or two,
not only these ferns
that were so difficult to get growing in our garden
as there is too warm and too much sun for them
Finally, they adjusted

My daughter calls all ferns her great grandma

She is already older than her great grandma
and the same age as my mother
when I was born

Andrus Kivirähk – the favourite author of young demanding readers

by Jaanika Palm

Novels, novellas, plays, opinion pieces, and radio programs – Andrus Kivirähk is so active in so many different creative fields that it is difficult to classify him into any one category. Defining him in the field of children's literature is no simpler. He has written plays, short stories, and longer prose for children, and has even been a co-screenwriter of several popular animated films.

The broad spectrum of Kivirähk's creative works also means he doesn't aim to prove himself or channel anything through his children's literature. He writes only when the words cannot be kept in any longer, which is why every one of his works is pure gold. They quickly earn the favor of children and adults, often make a buzz in the media (intentional or not), and win one or more of a variety of Estonian children's literature awards, for the most part. First print runs are closely followed by additional editions and translations.

Kivirähk entered the children's literary scene in 1995 with his veritably revolutionary book ***The Giraffe***. Its protagonist is a little girl named Kai, who embodies the new values of a new generation. Whereas Kai's parents are practical-minded good eaters, the girl herself is picky about food, but has an imagination that makes up for her imperfection in terms of liveliness. However, as her parents fail to understand her vivid and rich imagination, little Kai feels quite alone. The tapeworm Tõnis – which her parents believe she has – understands the girl and helps her find focus in a lonely world.

Sirli, Siim, and the Secrets (1999) similarly addresses feelings of loneliness, but from a slightly different angle. The work emphasizes that the line between people with practical and more stimulating dispositions does not divide them by age. Both the children (Siim is a wizard and Sirli keeps company with cloud ballerinas) and adults (Mom is the queen of a castle and Dad is unbeatable at athletics) have their own respective worlds of secrets, as do most of the other characters. Only the writer Mr. Lamb has forgotten his dreams. His drab life

only regains its color once he remembers the dreams he had in childhood.

Lotte's Journey South (2002) set a precedent in Estonian children's literature. Whereas it is common for literary characters to go from books to film reels, the opposite was true with Lotte. Just as in the animated film of same title (2000), the dog-girl Lotte lends a hand to her inventor father and an old explorer dog in helping the lost chick Pipo return south to his grandmother. Lotte the dog-girl is just like a human child – curious and hungry for knowledge, a little timid, and at the same time longing for adventure. She and all the other characters have their minor flaws but are good by nature – no one hurts or bullies anyone else over the course of the book. Could this be the reason why in addition to literature (the sequel *Lotte from Gadgetville* was published in 2006), Lotte has also become the protagonist of several children's plays, ABCs books, and animated films?

Kivirähk's children's storybook ***Limpa and the Pirates*** (2004) also raised a furor, as it was commissioned by the large Estonian beer and soft drink manufacturer A. Le Coq, the corporate mascot of which is the pig character Limpa. Estonia's media entered a heated debate about the relationship between children's literature, advertising, and financing, in which Kivirähk was accused of selling out and abandoning his creative freedom. The author himself parried the criticism by claiming the protagonist's name in no way affected the quality of his writing – which is likely true. In fact, Kivirähk's characters particularly spice up the work – there aren't many books in which pajamas are depicted as ferocious pirates in a crib-ship named *The Dark Dream*. The leader of the gang is a pillow who earned his stripes in the Pillow Fights and was hit by *Treasure Island*.

ANDRUS KIVIRÄHK · PHOTO BY EERO VABAMÄGI / EESTI MEEDIA

The title of Kivirähk's 2009 collection of children's short stories, which were earlier published in the media, received intense criticism as well – ***Poo and Spring***. His similar collections ***Carnival and Potato Salad*** (2015) and ***The Ghost***

and Facebook (2019) were strong proof that the popularity of Kivirähk's writing is guaranteed by more than just his choice of titles. The author's witty short stories have clearly perceptible thoughtful undertones – they are tied together by a warm, heartfelt fantasy world populated by a range of colorful characters. No matter whether these figures constitute humans, animals, objects, fantastical creatures, or foods, the author treats them all with the utmost warmth and respect.

In Kivirähk's children's novel ***Oscar and the Things*** (2015), he returns to a familiar topic – loneliness. Oscar has finished preschool and is looking forward to his first year of school. However, he is first forced to spend three summer months living with his grandmother in the countryside while his mother receives training in the US and his father is at work. The boy has yet to forge any deep ties with the faraway relative whom he and his parents visited infrequently up until then. As is the case with many of his peers, Oscar's mobile is like a security blanket. Alas, he forgets it at home and is overwhelmed by an even greater sense of abandonment without the electronic device. Luckily, Oscar manages to find a way out of the grim situation – he crafts a wooden mobile that allows him to speak to objects, which enriches the boy's life and ultimately helps him connect to his grandmother.

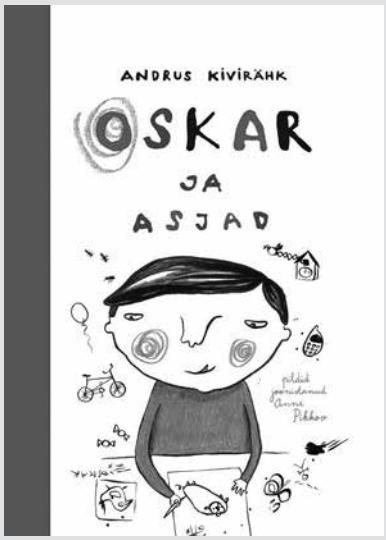
The plot of Kivirähk's latest children's book, ***Tilda and the Dust Angel*** (2018), revolves around a girl named Tilda who lives with her widowed mother. Tilda's father died when she was very young, so she has no memories of him. At the same time, her mother refuses to discuss the subject. When their home is left uncleaned for several days, Tilda is visited by the Dust Angel. In Kivirähk's fantasy, dust is something that contains the past and memories. If it weren't for dust, people would forget their feelings, where they came from, and would care only for the future. Then, the world would be austere and orderly like a computer game or a sterile hospital.

Indeed, none of Kivirähk's children's books are written simply for writing's sake. Readers can easily tell that he crafts his stories with goals and thorough consideration, addressing important contemporary issues while still observing them from eternal standpoints. A light and positive feeling thus washes over you whenever you finish one of his works – everything fits. The world around you seems brighter, the sky vaster, and your worries trivial. It's not uncommon for Kivirähk's newest book to quickly disappear from bookstore shelves, forcing eager readers to wait for another fresh shipment from the print house. Do we really have cause to complain that children don't read as much as they should? Is it possible they simply have high demands?

JAANIKA PALM is a researcher at the Estonian Children's Literature Center. She heads a children's literature research group, which has been responsible for several publications including *The Dictionary of Children's Literature* (2006), the *Estonian Children's Literature from 1991–2012 review* (2014), and *The Gold Reserve of Estonian Children's Literature* (2018).

Oscar and the Things

by Andrus Kivirähk
Excerpt translated by Adam Cullen



Oscar and the Things. *Film Distribution OÜ, 2015. Illustrated by Anne Pikkov.*

"Hello, balloon!" Oscar spoke into his mobile. "Can you hear me?"

"Why shouldn't I?" a somewhat nasally voice immediately replied. "I'm not deaf, if that's what you mean. What do you want?"

"I … I thought …" Oscar was taken back. "I was actually just … I wanted to ask how you're doing up there."

"I'm doing just fine, thank you," the red balloon said crisply. "The view from here is incredible. It's great being up high in general. But I suppose that must be hard to imagine for someone as tiny as you are."

"I'm not tiny!" Oscar protested.

"You certainly seem so from way up here," the balloon jeered. "It's a wonder that you can talk at all—where does a mouth even fit on someone so teensy-weensy?"

"Ha!" Oscar huffed. "Of *course* I have a mouth! And I have arms and legs, too!" he declared, playing his trump card. Just yesterday, Oscar had discovered that having such qualities could make you an outright celebrity among immobile objects, but his boasts had no effect on the balloon.

"My sympathies!" she snickered. "It's got to feel pretty awful having sausages hanging from your sides. They must get in the way whenever you're flying. Oh, *right*; I nearly forgot—you *can't* fly! Poor little thing! Well, I guess it makes sense that if you should have to just settle for a pair of arms and legs, to show them off all the time."

"I'm not showing off!" Oscar yelled. "I was just saying …"

"You were, too."

"I was not!" Oscar was furious, especially because he had, in fact, only brought up his limbs to earn the balloon's respect. Still, he'd failed spectacularly, because the balloon high up in the birch tree just continued making fun of him:

"What was your name again? Oscar? What a weird name! What are your famous arms and legs called, huh? And how many of them do you have? Just two?! Ha! Why'd you even mention them in the first place?! I hoped you'd have at least a hundred!"

"I'm not a centipede!" Oscar snorted. The balloon was getting on his nerves with all her mocking, but strangely, he didn't feel like ending the conversation yet. "Can I ask you something?"

"Me?!" the balloon echoed in surprise. "You want to ask *me* something? What an honour! But I don't have arms or legs! Not a single one! What could you want to ask somebody like me?"

She laughed spitefully.

"How'd you get stuck in this tree?" Oscar asked.

"What do you think? I grew here like a fungus!"

"No, you *flew* there," Oscar corrected.

"Is that right? Aren't you smart!"

"Where'd you come from?"

"The Moon."

"No, for real."

"For real—right off the surface of the Moon! Why don't you believe me?"

Oscar snorted, making the balloon snicker again.

"Fine, stop pouting," she finally sighed. "I didn't fly here from the Moon. I came from a house. I was blown up and tied to the porch, but I didn't feel like sticking around, so I skedaddled. Some people chased me, but they couldn't catch me, naturally—my pursuers had arms and legs just the same as you. He-he-he! They were as slow and awkward as potato sacks! I bet you're all related! I didn't pay any attention. Nope—I rose higher and higher and flew over field and forest. Once, I even sped through a little cloud and left a hole in it! In the end, I came across this tree and decided to land. It's pretty nice up here. Are you satisfied? Is that all you wanted to know?"

"Who inflated you?" Oscar asked.

"How should I know!? Why should I even care? I didn't look back," the balloon snapped.

"I came here from the city," Oscar said. For some strange reason, he felt like getting everything off his chest and telling it to the balloon in particular—the thought had never crossed his mind with the iron, the chair, or any of his other new acquaintances. "My mum is in America, but my dad has to go to work, so I've got to live with my grandma for two whole months. I was unbelievably bored and down in the dumps at first, and everything seemed so wrong, but then, I made myself a toy mobile that I can use to call things like you."

"Tch! *You're* a thing! A teensy little thing with arms and legs! I'm a balloon, if you haven't noticed. 'Course, *I* have no idea if you've got eyes or not—I wouldn't be surprised if you were blind."

"I'm not blind," said Oscar, trying to make peace. "I'm sorry—of course you're a balloon. A red balloon." He hesitated. "And a very pretty one, at that," he added.

"You think so?" the balloon asked slyly. "You just might be right. It's lucky I landed in your treetop, then!"

"It sure is," Oscar agreed. "And I'm especially lucky to have gotten myself a

AN ILLUSTRATION BY ANNE PIKKOV FROM THE BOOK *OSCAR AND THE THINGS* BY ANDRUS KIVIRÄHK.

magical mobile. Otherwise, I really don't know what I'd have done here at my grandma's house. I was honestly bored to tears, at first."

"It must be boring for all you things down there," said the balloon. "You can't fly, so you spend your time on all sorts of foolish things. Just imagine—a magic mobile! I don't even have a phone, but I can talk to whomever I please."

"Can you talk to birds, too?" Oscar asked.

"Why shouldn't I?"

"I don't think I can …" Oscar murmured, trailing off into thought. "I don't believe my mobile will let me, though it's true I haven't tried yet … Hey, balloon! I'm going to hang up now …"

"Is that right! Tired of me already? Fine!"

"No, I just want to see if I can call birds or bugs with my mobile, too," Oscar explained. "I'll call you back later."

"You can try, but I'm not available *all* the time, you know," the balloon replied importantly. "I've got better things to do than to gab on the phone all day long."

"I can't imagine you have too many things to do up in a treetop," Oscar reckoned.

"You don't, huh? Well, fine! Goodbye, then!"

The balloon hung up. Oscar stared at her from the ground. Framed against the bright blue sky, she was as radiant as a big red blossom.

Book reviews

by Marek Tamm, Elisa-Johanna Liiv, Mari Niitra, Maarja Helena Meriste, Siim Lill, Pille-Riin Larm, Mihkel Kunnus, Helena Koch, Taavi Hallimäe

ANDREI IVANOV · PHOTO BY RAUNO VOLMAR / EKSPRESS MEEDIA

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Varrak 2019, 536 pp
ISBN 9789985347126

Homo viator, the travelling man, is one of the defining figures of our times, and Tallinn-based writer Andrei Ivanov is his messenger. Over the last ten years Ivanov has achieved the impressive feat of publishing more than ten books, almost all of which seek to understand the lives of wanderers, exiles, émigrés, the stateless, and other outsiders.

In 2013, Ivanov embarked on a new cycle of novels focussing on the history of Russian émigrés, the first part of which was *Harbin Moths*. Ivanov's most recent work, *The Inhabitants of the Curious Cemetery* (2019), can be seen as the next instalment in this series, and is the author's *magnum opus*. All of Ivanov's main themes and literary influences come together in this novel,

allowing his literary talents to achieve heights few other writers can aspire to.

Whereas *Harbin Moths* tells the story of Russian émigrés living in Estonia between 1920 and 1930, *The Inhabitants of the Curious Cemetery* focusses on the Russian émigré community in Paris, and spans half a century, focusing on three critical periods: 1918, 1946 and 1968. The two novels are linked through one of the characters from *Harbin Moths*, Alexey Kablukov, who dispatches noxious letters to Estonia about the Russian émigrés' lousy life in Paris. Unemployed and outcast, Kablukov ends his days in a graveyard, in a marquis' burial chamber. He doesn't mention, however, either the name of the graveyard or the marquis. Eventually, the reader discovers that this is the 'curious cemetery' of the novel's title, or rather it is the dogs' graveyard in Asnières-sur-Seine, which is thought to be the first of its kind, and was situated in an area not far from Paris where many of the Russian émigrés lived.

The Inhabitants of the Curious Cemetery is a panoramic novel that vividly brings to life the worlds of three generations of Russian émigrés in Paris. To recap, the Russian emigration began with the October Revolution and continued apace for two decades, meaning that by the start of the Second World War almost 80,000 Russians had established themselves in France. Paris quickly became the capital of Russian emigration, not to be replaced by New York until the middle of the century.

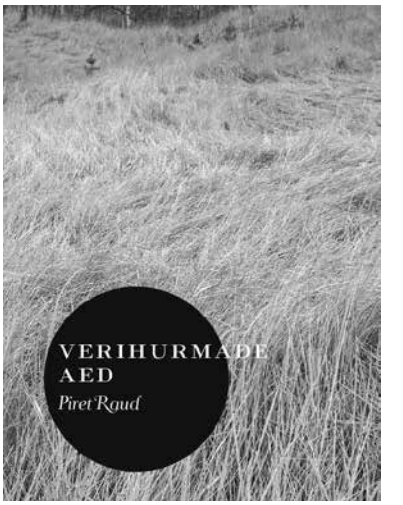
The novel contains multiple voices, including three first-person protagonists, whose voices start to overlap, to intertwine, and to set off unexpected echoes.

The colourful lives of the Russian émigrés are portrayed from the perspectives of three protagonists. We learn about the difficulties they have acclimatising, the traumas inflicted on them by war, their struggle against Communism, and their homesickness. In this world, real-life and fictional characters mingle freely; at the risk of oversimplification one can argue that there are three types of characters in the novel: fictional characters, characters inspired by real-life people, and real-life historical figures. For instance, a whole gallery of historical characters feature in the novel, including Nikolay Berdyaev, André Breton, Paul Éluard, Théodore Fraenkel, Charles de Gaulle, Pavel Milyukov and Boris Poplavsky.

It could be said that the city of Paris is the fourth character in the novel. Ivanov makes Paris almost physically tangible, and does so for all three of the historical periods the novel covers. Right at the start, the author gives a captivating description of Paris life, through the words of the character Morgenstern. To provide a flavour of his writing style, I quote it at length: "Paris whips you on, kicks you up the backside, sprinkles you with rain, splashes you in puddles, plays pranks on you, spits swearwords at you, whispers gossip in your ear, grabs at coat hems and shopfronts, pulls you close, kisses you on both cheeks, fishes cash out of your pocket, waves its hat at you, looks you longingly in the eye, and then embraces you in its dark, satin night."

In addition to the richness of historical detail, *The Inhabitants of the Curious Cemetery* is a homage to the art of the novel. Ivanov has succeeded to host the majority of his literary influences here. There are multiple references to Dickens, in particular

PIRET RAUD . PHOTO BY DMITRI KOTJUH



The Pickwick Papers, to Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy, while Céline and Joyce interact in intriguing ways, as do Bunin and Nabokov. One can detect the stylistic influence of Mikhail Bulgakov, traces of Cormac McCarthy's literary devices, as well as the influence of Goncharov's *Oblomov*.

However, the greatest appeal of *The Inhabitants of the Curious Cemetery* lies in the author's command of language. No one else writes quite like Ivanov. His writing grabs the reader and pulls them into its embrace, wraps them in multiple narrative strands, and leads them through fictional labyrinths, providing intermittent flashes of light and relief, before dragging them back into its depths.

Ivanov creates entrancing literary worlds, he gets under the reader's skin, conjuring up colours, smells, and emotions; he dictates the pace, providing a cathartic experience that is almost physically tangible.

The Inhabitants of the Curious Cemetery is Ivanov's first full-length symphony, a work in which he demonstrates his talents with every literary instrument. It is one of the most brilliant achievements in Estonian literature of the last few decades. **MT**

PIRET RAUD

VERIHURMADE AED
(THE GARDEN OF DEVIL'S MILKS)

Tänapäev 2019, 208 pp
ISBN 9789949856206

According to the text on the back cover of Piret Raud's novel *The Garden of Devil's Milks*, this is "a book about intimacy, the fragility of it, and an eternal yearning that shapes lives". This phrase really could sum up the whole book. But how does Raud do it? She tells us the stories of three people. They are gripping, realistic and profoundly human; with their joys, worries and frailties. Raud creates characters in whom we can recognize ourselves or people we know. Reading her is just like sitting in a café with a friend and them wanting to tell you a story; Raud is that friend.

Raud's protagonists are Ella Valter, an elderly lady who collects discarded houseplants, Renate Grünberg, editor-in-chief of

a family magazine who looks for little miracles in daily life, and Joonatan Klaassen, a young photographer trying to get over an unhappy love affair.

In her novel, Raud brings the trio together by chance, although the reader might also find other connections between them. All three of them are shown as having obsessions, linked to their memories or how they see themselves. With this in mind, we may also characterise them differently.

Ella Valter, the old lady with an unhappy (love) story and a dream, has a plan to restore the old cemetery - as a way of paying her respects to the one love of her life. Renate Grünberg, who needs to protect her position as a Woman – the ideal mother, spouse and best possible editor of the family magazine 'Mama' at any price. Joonatan Klaassen, the young photographer, who refuses to move on from the radiant memories of his first love.

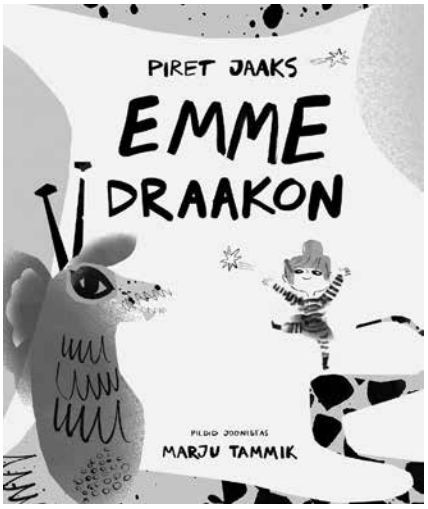
Through all the challenges its characters face and all the growing they do as people, *The Garden of Devil's Milks* leaves above all a glimmer of hope; the words "This will turn out fine. Everything turns out fine, just as long as it's given space and watered properly" can very often apply just as well to people as to plants. **EJL**

PIRET JAAKS
EMME DRAAKON
(MOMMY'S DRAGON)
Päike ja Pilv 2019, 36 pp
ISBN 9789949737635

Piret Jaaks and Marju Tammik's picture book *Mommy's Dragon* may be a treat for little booklovers, but it can also offer some consolation to their stressed-out parents.

Piret Jaaks has studied theater, worked as a journalist, and is currently pursuing a doctoral degree in dramaturgy from the Estonian Academy of Music and Theater. Primarily an author of plays, short prose, and literary reviews, *Mommy's Dragon* is her second children's book. Both this latest children's work and her first, *The Mystery of the Vanished Sock* (2017), open with familiar details from everyday life – in the latter, it is a sock that has lost its partner. *Mommy's Dragon* proceeds from a chaotic situation every family has encountered, but is explored through an unusual metaphor –

PIRET JAAKS · PHOTO BY HEIKO KRUUSI / ÕHTULEHT



living inside of the little girl's mommy is an fearsome, fire-breathing dragon that shows itself from time to time.

When might that be, you ask? The narrating tot appears to have some notion of it herself: for instance, when jam drips onto the floor from a toppled jar or spilled juice makes Mommy's laptop crash. Situations such as these tend to be agonizingly common in families with small children. And at such moments, "Mommy gets red-hot inside and can't help but scream: AAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!"

Jaaks's story is warmly written, empathetic towards both children and adults, and reaches a moving conclusion. The dragon is frightening, but at the same time, the tiny narrator tries to "tame" it by imagining the beast as colorful and precious. She realizes she would even be sad if her mommy didn't have the dragon anymore. Still, can one actually manage to raise any child without having such a creature inside of them? Whereas Estonian children's literature has habitually personified youthful mischief in the form of various imaginary beings, the focus in Jaaks's book is flipped to manifest the parent's emotions. As funny as it may be, the story uses the terrible dragon to humanize the parent themselves, allowing them the right to work through negative feelings.

Wonderful illustrations by Marju Tammik add tone and expressiveness to the story – *Mommy's Dragon* is her second children's book, too. Having worked mainly as a fashion illustrator, Tammik's style is genuine, vivid, and fresh. Vibrant blotches, stylized characters, collages, and dynamics characterize her contributions. The mother-daughter relationship that remains trusting in spite of every mishap is particularly accented by the artistic illustrations. The scenes observed through a child's eyes are complemented by an alternative graphic vision with flair. **MN**

DORIS KAREVA

SUIK JA SILLERDUS

(DROWSE AND SHIMMER)

Verb 2019, 128 pp
ISBN 9789949723867

It's not exactly common for poetry's charisma to be so great that it reshapes even the most formal and unpoetic elements of a book's paratext—such as the publishing details. In any case, the title page of Doris Kareva's latest collection *Drowse and Shimmer* declares that all rights are "cared for and protected". This strikes the tuning fork for how readers should approach the work, as it contains all that is prevalent throughout the author's writing (and which deepens and takes even firmer hold in this collection)—a fundamentally caring, noticing, humble, and empathetic pose. *My heart does not hand itself over. / It pulses outside of me, / everywhere.* (p. 11)

The reception of Kareva's works frequently draws such keywords as "high" or "classic" poetry, which would appear to signal an elite or inaccessible nature. Recurring capitalized entities (Nameless, Creator, God, Intuition) and references to literary classics both Estonian and foreign (Betti Alver, Marie Under, Shakespeare) also demonstrate her unequivocal broad reach.

Kareva's focus indeed lies upon a plane higher than the individual—it occupies the

DORIS KAREVA. PHOTO BY KAIDO VAINOMAA

sphere of religion, mystery, and vision. Yet, humanity itself and all we tend to regard as small and ordinary, are the gateway to these spheres: *Every living leaflet / is the heart of the universe* (p. 73). Kareva sees her poetic talent more as a divine task than a personal adornment, the core of which is the art of listening and not of articulation: *My voice is worth not even copper, / but my listening is gold* (p. 79). From this standpoint, the poet is a servant. She expresses not herself, but a higher truth with herself as the vehicle (as well as she is able). This truth reveals itself as a *shimmering* when one *drowses off* momentarily. In Kareva's mystical and romantic world, drowsing and dozing mark the borderlands of semi-consciousness that run between waking life and deep slumber—a place where one trickles from their rational self and is met by the reflection of truth, which cannot seem to fit in the rigid frame of wakefulness.

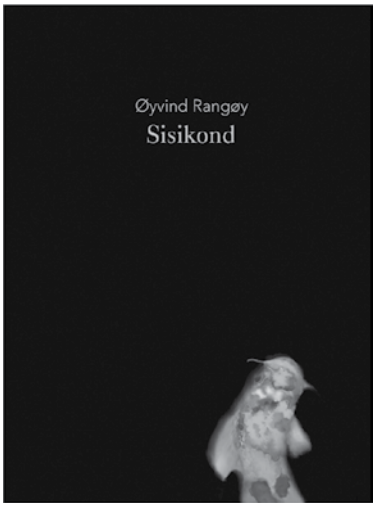
The encompassing of these otherwise imposing and elusive topics in graceful, rhythmic, lyrical, and slender locution gives the impression of a divine gift. To an experienced poetry reader, Kareva's fondness for polar opposites (light and darkness, wisdom and foolishness, the head and heart) may at times come off as manneristic. Nevertheless, they do not reflect a black-and-white nature in Kareva's worldview, but rather function as contours for hard-to-grasp ideas of enormous dimensions that no one is capable of handling unambiguously. *Drowse and Shimmer* firmly establishes Kareva's role as the voice of a collective heart. **MHM**

ØYVIND RANGØY
SISIKOND
(ENTRAILS)

Vihmakass ja kakerdaja 2019, 65 pp
ISBN 9789949997732

Øyvind Rangøy is a Norwegian poet whose life is tightly entwined with Estonia. His first collection of Estonian-language poems *Entrails* won the 2019 Betti Alver Award for Debut Literature. The release of a collection of original Estonian-language poems by an author who learned the language only in adulthood is impressive in and of itself,

ØYVIND RANGØY · PHOTO BY KRISTJAN TEEDEMA / POSTIMEES GRUPP



but what has this Norwegian Estophile managed to do with words to earn him such fame and recognition?

Entrails is composed of thoughtful story-like poems that paint the picture of a bright and measureless world, mainly with the help of wild vistas and (childhood) memories. Rangøy also records many simple domestic scenes, the ordinariness of which he has in no way tried to sand into a more poetic form. The average Estonian might even find it odd how his relaxed, warm, and trusting nature meshes so organically with the intellectual expanse. Is this really someone who has grown up in a true welfare state?

I come from a land of granite. A land of storms. A land of cliffs and shipwrecks,

but with the childlike belief that the state wishes its citizens well. With the childlike

belief that human society is, all in all, humane.

Here, the soil is soft and the stories hard. […] ("Soft Soil")

Although Rangøy touches upon the themes of Estonia and Norway as one would expect – of two homes, languages, cultures, and histories – their distinction is not of central importance. *Entrails'* metaphysical stratum sprouts from the hearth and mundane life. Childhood memories are observed not as an adult looking back in time, but seemingly from a third dimension; suspended above one's own life. His birth is described from a point in spacetime at which it hasn't happened yet. The absence of page numbers similarly relaxes the accustomed rigidity of linear systems. An all-penetrating light is captured in surrounding nature and commonplace objects; noticing it supports and enriches a person. *Entrails* is a devoted display of reverence for the richness that lies within all of creation:

There isn't little here, I muse. There is a lot. I draw it so

deep into my lungs it hurts. Like light.

("Fracturing")

MHM

ASKO KÜNNAP: PHOTO BY KARL MARTIN SINIJÄRV

ASKO KÜNNAP
KERAVÄLK KOPUTAB TULLES
(THE LIGHTNING BALL KNOCKS AS IT ENTERS)

Näo Kirik 2019, 112 pp
ISBN 9789949723096

Asko Künnap is an orchestra of a man: he is a designer, artist, creative advertiser, translator, and probably much more, at least to the same degree as he is a poet. In the world of Estonian literature, he is also known as one in a trio of poets (the others being Jürgen Rooste and Karl Martin Sinijärv) that has published four playful and experimental joint collections to date. Künnap has released seven individual poetry collections prior to *The Lightning Ball Knocks as It Enters*.

The literary critic Andri Ksenofontov has fittingly called Künnap's writing "designed poetry", referring to the author's painstaking efforts taken to design and compose his poems in addition to all other elements of the books. This also applies to his latest collection: a kind of aspiration for exclusivity reveals itself already when skimming the description on an online bookselling site. The front cover of every copy features a unique hole burned by hand. This fact alone (along with the unusually high price tag for an Estonian poetry collection) points to the author's disdain for cheap, homogenous, mass-produced culture. Künnap's own illustrations and arrangement of the poems make the work even more extraordinary.

It's difficult to draw any generalizations about the poems themselves, which form a diverse panoply. At times, it's even a challenge to seize upon a specific intention in any one poem, as complete messages have been sprinkled across the whole collection. For example, there resonates scorn directed at the meaningless phenomena of our modern day (Facebook, hipsters, and 3D printers are just a few that receive jabs), but it's hard to pick out any one straightforwardly "social-critical" poem. Künnap notes his skepticism of modern follies in passing; still, he maintains a cool composure and deems them unworthy of excessive space in his writing.

Künnap's style is brazen, incentive, and occasionally a touch archaic. The swift thrust, beckoning tone, and endeavor to

achieve a hearty, rustic relish similar to that used by the Estonian poet Hando Runnel encourage one to read his poems more as lyrics. That being said, Künnap's deeply romantic side is not left overshadowed. The luxuriously lyrical and pleasing poems may be the collection's strongest suit for some readers, though they do require their grating and more playful companions for comparison – Künnap's cynical rebellious side wouldn't put up with lavish sentimentality. I'll conclude with a verse that sums up the author's perspective quite nicely:

I'm tired
of your trivial TV shows,
of this dizzying debt of karma,
I'm tired of myself,
of inward gazes and views,
of the PM's incessant drivel.

MHM

PAAVO MATSIN
KONGO TANGO
(THE CONGO TANGO)

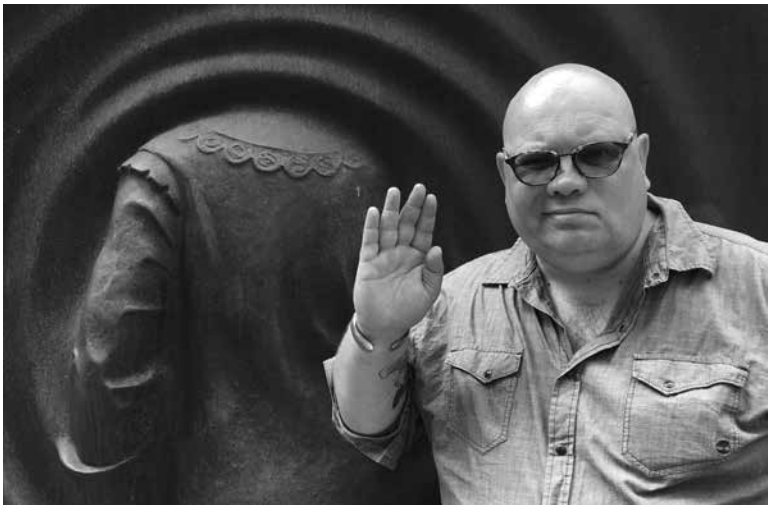
Lepp ja Nagel 2019, 232 pp
ISBN 9789789949014

Paavo Matsin's new novel is a treat for the author's long-time fans. The story is fast-paced and spliced with a generous helping of humor and esoteric allusions. Still, the author's ability to write multiple coexisting layers, and his shift towards a more "average-reader-friendly" style will make the work appealing to a much larger audience.

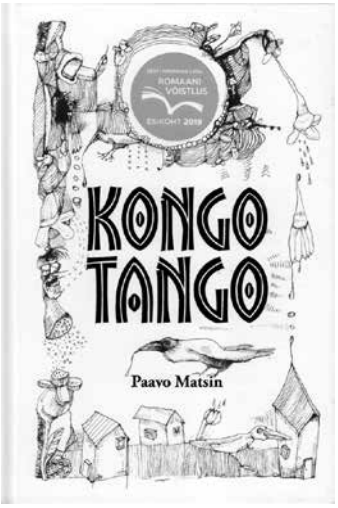
Matsin's writing career has progressed along a very reliable track. His earlier works are experimental and esoteric, brimming with alchemic paradoxes and frames of mind. Yet, with his novel *Gogol's Disco* – which received the European Union Prize for Literature and has since been translated into more widely-read languages – Matsin stepped out of his niche. The experimentality and madness that were so dominant in his writing slipped into a stream of classic plot trajectory. Whereas Matsin's *The Black Sun* – his last novel before *The Congo Tango* – might have scared off some readers by immersing them in the wild 19th-century nightlife of the small South Estonian town of Võru and being partially written in a disorienting kaleidoscope of slang (including an unforgettable Jamaican stork!), the avian protagonists of *The Congo Tango* once again possess balance and finesse. At least judging by first appearances. As the Estonian author Peeter Sauter commented: "There are several layers to Matsin's writing – you can read it as a children's book, crime novel, fantasy, picaresque, or mystical treatise."

The Congo Tango won the 2019 Estonian Writers' Union's Novel Competition. Matsin himself has commented: "At first, I even tried to dial down the whole style to zero so the jury wouldn't recognize my writing, but by the end, I just couldn't write that way. I attempted to write it as a poor B-category crime novel for a while – à la someone walking down a foggy street in England – but my style still won out in the end."

The main storyline does begin in England when the six ravens of the Tower of London escape – according to myth, even the loss of one will spell doom for Britain and the Crown. Divided into three sections, titled "The Escape", "The Calling",



PAAVO MATSIN : ARCHIVE PHOTO



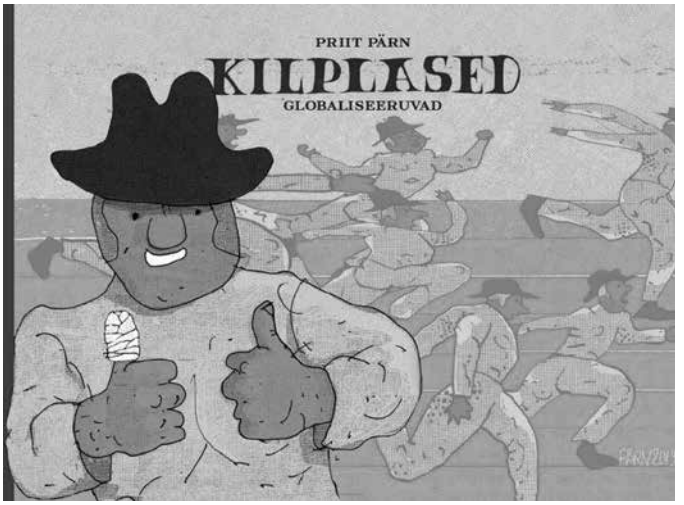
and "The Melancholy Angel", the book is set in London, Budapest, Cairo, Brussels, and ultimately Prague. *The Congo Tango* is made riveting by the array of compact scenes that build up the story – like a fine illustrated alchemic work; ones so vivid and engrossing that even readers with a poor sense of imagination will be drawn along. Ravenmaster Sebastian, and a young Czech alchemy researcher, Zito, find themselves swept into a sequence of adventures that neither could have ever predicted. Blood-soaked biscuits, the immortal Count of St. Germain, cafés, schnitzels, digressions into the world of taxidermy, Congo witches, and much more appear along the way. The ravens have scattered wide and are pursued not only by humans, but also by an angel with a decisive role to play (androgynously depicted by the book's illustrator Remo Teder). Matsin has borrowed from the visions of Emanuel Swedenborg in his descriptions of the heavenly being. Swedenborg was a Swedish theologian and mystic who has continued to inspire many celebrated writers: Strindberg, Baudelaire, Borges, Miłosz, etc. I'm also reminded of Laura Lindstedt's 2015 Finlandia Prize-winning novel, *Oneiron*.

Animal alchemy, romance between human and raven, shapeshifting – all these elements create an atmosphere on the level of stories by Gustav Meyrink or other German-language authors of magic and mysticism (such as Paul Leppin). The sporadic illustrations I mentioned before only add to the effect.

Anyone incurious about such literary heights may, however, simply read *The Congo Tango* for its first-rate fashion tips: "A tight-fitting blue Dunhill suit or a checkered Hackett still to that day gave a convincing impression of its owner having leapt straight out of a 19th-century City bank vault. The whole system of men's fashion was, in reality, highly complex, because it was said that clothes should be purchased with intelligence, donned with attentiveness and care, and forgotten about once they were worn." (p. 98)

We can only hope that Matsin's pen continues trekking its multi-leveled path and he earns the international recognition he most certainly deserves – and not only by readers. The hundreds of universities researching the works of Arthur Machen, Edgar Allan

PRIIT PÄRN · PHOTO BY PIIA RUBER



Poe, and others should swiftly turn their attention towards the small Estonian town of Viljandi, where there sits a multifaceted storyteller whose writing makes it entirely within the bounds of possibility that such prominent names will one day be shrugged off as literary hacks. **SL**

PRIIT PÄRN

KILPLASED GLOBALISEERUVAD
(THE GOTHAMITES GO GLOBAL)

Tänapäev 2019, 64 pp.
ISBN 9789949856268

The outstanding Estonian animated film director Priit Pärn needs no long introduction. His films have been hits in several international festivals, and one can be so bold as to state that he is one of the most important contemporary animation authors of our day. Pärn is also a prolific caricaturist, graphic artist, and illustrator – last year, the American publisher Archipelago Books released Eno Raud's book *The Gothamites* (translated by Adam Cullen), which features Pärn's fantastic art.

The Gothamites Go Global doesn't simply include Pärn's illustrations, but is a new book authored by the artist as well. It was commissioned by the Spanish comics publisher Fulgencio Pimentel e Hijos, which intended to release his 1977 *The Gothamites*. As he started to redraw the book, Pärn soon realized it was transforming into an entirely new one. "There was no point in copying something I did a long time ago – the Gothamites started crawling into our modern day."

Who are the Gothamites? They are, in fact, very universal characters – included in the folklore of many nations is a village populated by rather bizarre people. The Gothamites found their way into Estonia in 1857 when F. R. Kreutzwald – who also authored the Estonian epic *Kalevipoeg* – wrote a book in Estonian based on similar German stories. His *The Gothamites* doesn't fall far from the epic in terms of its fame or various interpretations.

The problems Pärn's universal Gothamites tackle in his new book are universal as well. At the center of the plot is the good old story of how the Gothamites build their council house, but he uses it to address many painful issues of our day: deforestation, climate change, the longing of small nations to be noticed, populism, and more. Pärn has

said that the title doesn't mean stupidity is spreading around the world, but that a new stupidity is moving from our world to that of the Gothamites.

The Gothamites Go Global is packed with layers of meaning, humor, and wordplay. Pärn is both sarcastic and heartfelt, which can be perceived in the illustrations themselves, the text bubbles, and the subtitles. His masterful and highly detailed artwork, done with the assistance of his wife Olga Pärn, is also deserving of praise.

Lastly, *The Gothamites Go Global* is itself, as a book, universal as well. Children and adults alike will find their "own" story within its pages. Those who are still too young to read or to catch the references to present-day problems will be fascinated by the illustrations while adults can enjoy the extremely dense work as a whole.

"On top of the fact that the Gothamites are not fools, they have one incredible quality. Could it perhaps be the ability to adapt? Or the skill to adjust? Basically, it's one in the same," Pärn has remarked. Absolutely! I'm convinced that we'll hear of the tenacious Gothamites again and again. The whole world *is* filled with them. **PRL**

KAUR RIISMAA
VÄIKE FERDINAND
(LITTLE FERDINAND)

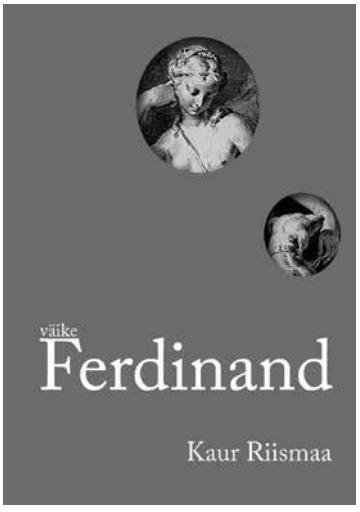
Vihmakass ja kakerdaja 2019, 320 pp
ISBN 9789949997763

The title page of Kaur Riismaa's *Little Ferdinand* includes a promise: "The characters of this novel have been actual living souls. One may check, though they will hardly get very far," and the work itself begins as such: "'Who? Mr. Immanuel Kant? No, no—inconsequential. A natural scientist with an interest in metaphysics.' Heisenberg smirked and dismissed the comment with a wave."

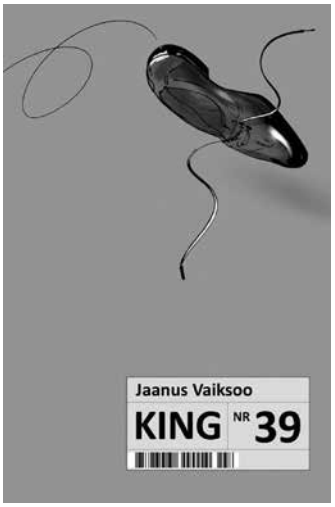
Also spoken on the very first page are these words: "Mr. Weninger, please understand—I cannot afford such an error as a young natural scientist who closes his office door behind him and busies himself in inference. A metaphysician must drape his spirit across the whole world; a metaphysician cannot limit himself to sitting in Königsberg. Your natural scientist can ascertain the nature of the entire world from the peace of his own chambers, naturally."

No doubt this type of opening sparks expectations of something hyper-intellectual to

KAUR RIISMAA · PHOTO BY JOHANNA-MAI RIISMAA



JAANUS VAIKSOO · PHOTO BY ALAR MADISSON



come. Riismaa does launch immediately with Kant and metaphysics, but at the same time, the usual understanding of the fundamental differences between a natural scientist and a metaphysician is turned on its head. Dense philosophical and historical literature, one might think – but this is not the case. It soon becomes clear that *Little Ferdinand* is something entirely different. The author takes a dreamlike leap into the 20th century, switching a thoroughly noble classical style for Mikhail Shishkin/Nikolai Baturin-like associationism. It's possible I may have already spoiled some part the book by giving these two examples, but one common thread throughout the work is the constant disappointment of reader expectations as an artistic device. If disappointment sounds too sinister, then one could say that there are surprises in store till the very end. The only thing one may count on is that Riismaa's style is elegant and eloquent. The novel is brimming with toponyms and fine details, giving the impression that the author immersed himself in a lost world. That being said, *Little Ferdinand* is also quite demanding of the reader. One could also claim it does not put forth any great idea, much less a particular moral or ideological approach. Long after you finish reading and close the book, you still feel as if you've just emerged from a strange and enchanting dream.

It's been said that Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* – one of my favorite books as a young man – is a failed masterpiece. I believe this can be said of Kaur Riismaa's *Little Ferdinand* as well. **MK**

JAANUS VAIKSOO
KING NR 39
(SHOE #39)
Ärkel 2019, 184 pp
9789949727223

Jaanus Vaiksoo's *Shoe #39* tells the story of 11-year-old Paul, who skips school for the first time in his life and tumbles headfirst into a string of adventures. The boy meets a local man named Artur and his daughter Minna, discovers his first love (a saleswoman named Jekaterina), and – most importantly – ducks into a shoe store to escape a pair of bullies. Inside the store, he notices a mysterious man who buys the exact same pair of size-39 leather shoes

every day. Paul and Minna set off to solve the mystery.

Vaiksoo's protagonist is a classic fifth grader who proves that even being an avid learner can be cool. Otherwise Paul would have no friends at school, nor the slightest chance to become pals with a girl as terrific as Minna. Paul has an especially keen interest in mathematics, which ultimately helps solve the puzzle. True, he does fall victim to his classmates Sumo and Plum's bullying as a consequence of his hobby, but he prevails thanks to attentive adults and his own courage.

Although Paul feels unsure of himself at first, his self-confidence grows over time with spunky, clever Minna, her open mind and carefree nature, by his side. Just as important, however, is Paul's relationship with Minna's father, who treats the boy like his own son in spite of their age gap. The two develop a sense of trust to the level that Paul takes no shame in asking Artur for help when the kids get into trouble.

Even though Paul isn't from a broken home, his parents don't have much time for their son. Doubtless, this is one reason for the strong impression Minna and Artur's close relationship has upon him. At a time when there is a great deal of literature depicting split families, the domestic warmth radiating from *Shoe #39* is refreshing and reminds one of happier times.

Surprisingly, an element of fantasy is also wound into the otherwise realistic work. As he tries on different shoes at the store, Paul embarks on fantasies that reflect his dreams and hopes for becoming a man. For instance, wearing a pair of running shoes, he runs a daydream marathon and wins. Putting on boots, however, the boy celebrates a remarkably good catch while out fishing.

Vaiksoo's *Shoe #39* is a multi-layered book that includes excitement, escapades, and romance alike. The author's respect for his target audience glows through every page with a tone that is light, heartfelt, and spiced with good-natured humor, resulting in an entertaining and thought-provoking literary companion for young readers. **HK**

EIA UUS

TÜDRUKUNE

(GIRLIE)

Postimees Kirjastus 2019, 272 pp
ISBN 9789949669653

Eia Uus's new novel, *Girlie,* could be catalogued in the "leisure literature" section, on account of (most of all) its swift pace of storytelling. The novel doesn't tell you how you should live or change the world, but that storytelling is what we as humans have done since the very beginning. No doubt the world will adjust accordingly.

Even so, Uus has carefully framed her depiction of life's unstoppable progress, selecting what to show the reader and what not. *Girlie* contains a fair dose of social critique in addition to its casual, straightforward style. It is a relatively candid snapshot of life that addresses the everyday harassment of women of all ages, bodily awareness, and power-based sexual relationships, as well as the heightened social requirements placed on women, and the marginalization of these topics – mainly by men. It is life at its most genuine, regardless of whether it is noticed;

EIA UUS · PHOTO BY BIRGIT VARBLANE

much less acknowledged. At the same time, Uus applies no censor – the novel isn't explicit about the topics, but instead gives the reader the choice of whether to be human and notice, or keep their eyes and mouth shut.

The tragic nature of the issues the author handles does not conflict with the lightness of an easy read. Uus does not aestheticize normality; does not credit it with more importance than it should have. Yet, neither does she reveal the brutality of mundane life – she creates something much finer. Specifically, Uus highlights how accustomed people are to violence against women – the way it subtly affects girls who have not yet realized their identities and is even, publicly and with total societal participation, inflicted upon well-known politicians who are well aware of their image. Whereas the former are just learning to see their inequal position in Estonia's quite masculine society, the latter are unfortunately already used to the situation and, in spite of it all, still able to garner support for themselves and their policies. It is a society in which brutality itself has transformed into something utterly ordinary and commonplace. In fact, the "leisureliness" of *Girlie* seems to emphasize the obscenity of such violence.

The dynamics between the novel's characters is observed mainly through superficial descriptions – even the contradictions and doubts hovering in the protagonist's mind are introduced more through plot points than inner monologue. Although the details of her inner workings remain quite vague, she faces many ethical dilemmas and existential questions tied together by childhood traumas, the process of adjusting to social norms, and the clearly more liberal attitudes of the younger generation. At least two key arguments in *Girlie* point to the incompatibility of the conventions of different eras: firstly, that a conflict – even the most personal – is always social and derived from the present; and secondly, that what was once learned must be forgotten. Although *Girlie* is relatively hopeful in terms of the future, the author appears to acknowledge that a good future depends on people's consistent personal everyday choices – on how well one can forget what they've previously internalized. **TH**

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Selected translations 2018

Finnish

INDREK HARGLA
Apteeker Melchior ja Gotlandi kurat
Apteekkari Melchior ja Gotlannin piru,
translated by Jouko Vanhanen
Published by Into, 2019

EEVA PARK
Lõks lõpmatuses
Viimeisellä rajalla, translated by Sanna Immanen
Published by Into, 2019

A. H. TAMMSAARE
Ma armastasin sakslast
Rakastin saksalaista, translated by Juhani Salokannel
Published by Aviador, 2019

Dutch

JAAN KROSS
Rakvere romaan
Strijd om de stad, translated by Frans van Nes
Published by Prometheus, 2019

English

BETTI ALVER, ELISABETH ASPE,
AIMÉE BEEKMAN, MAIMU BERG,
MAARJA KANGRO, VIIVI LUIK,
HELGA NÕU, EEVA PARK, LILLI PROMET,
ASTA PÕLDMÄE, MARI SAAT, ELIN TOONA
Eesti naisautorite loomingut
Baltic Belles: The Dedalus Book of
Estonian Women's Literature
Translated by Adam Cullen, Eva Finch, Jason Finch,
Christopher Moseley
Published by Dedalus, 2019

Greek

EDA AHI, ANDRUS KASEMAA, IGOR KOTJUH, KAUPO MEIEL, KRISTA OJASAAR, CAROLINA PIHELGAS, MAARJA PÄRTNA, KAUR RIISMAA, JÜRGEN ROOSTE, JAAK URMET
Eesti kaasaegse luule antoloogia
Anthology of young Estonian poets
Translated by Edith-Helen Ulm
Published by Vakxikon, 2019

Italian

HEIKI ERNITS, ANDRUS KIVIRÄHK
Lotte reis lõunamaale
Lotte. L'avventuroso viaggio al sud
Translated by Danielle Monticelli
Published by De Bastiani, 2019

Latvian

REIN RAUD
Rekonstruktsioon
Rekonstrukcija
Translated by Maima Grīnberga
Published by Jāņa Rozes apgāds, 2019

JAAN UNDUSK
Teekond Hispaania
Ceļojums, vārdā Spānija
Translated by Maima Grīnberga
Published by Neputns, 2019

Lithuanian

JAAN KROSS
Kolme katku vahel I
Lyno akrobatas. Tarp trijų marų I
Translated by Danutė Sirijos Giraitė
Published by baltos lankos, 2020

Russian

VAHUR AFANASJEV
Serafima ja Bogdan
Серафима и Богдан
Translated by Vera Prohorova
Published by Vemsa OÜ, 2019

CHILDREN´S LITERATURE

Finnish

KAIRI LOOK
Piia präänik kolib sisse
Piia Pikkuleipä muuttaa
Translated by Katariina Suurpalo
Published by Aviador, 2019

LEELO TUNGAL
Seltsimees laps ja suured inimesed
Toveri lapsi
Translated by Anja Salokannel
Published by Arktinen Banaani, 2019

Latvian

REELI REINAUS
Maarius, maagia ja libahunt Liisi
Marks, maģija un vilkate Vilma
Translated by Maima Grīnberga
Published by Jāņa Rozes apgāds, 2020

EDGAR VALTER
Pokuraamat
Poķu grāmata
Translated by Daila Ozola
Published by Zvaigzne ABC, 2019

EDGAR VALTER
Kassike ja kakuke
Kaķītis un Ūpītis
Translated by Daila Ozola
Published by Zvaigzne ABC, 2019

Estonian

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ALL SOULS' NIGHT by Kaljo Põllu

We know who we are when we go. We go as men and as women, as little children and as decrepit old people, we go from beds and from fields, from behind the plough and from the boat seat, holding a spoon and gripping a sword, with pain and with joy, with sorrow and with merriment, with and without fear. We go. We all go.

But there cannot only be going, there must also be coming. We shall go, but we shall also return. Yet we do not really know who we shall be then — humans, perhaps, babies from the womb, visible, perhaps, or else invisible, inaudible, bodiless like wind, like a thought or a dream. But no matter how we shall come back to our kith and kin, we shall come back and stay with you. We shall become you, you will become us, once and for ever.

Jaan Kaplinski

THE FRONT COVER OF THE FIRST ISSUE OF *ESTONIAN LITERARY MAGAZINE*, PUBLISHED IN 1995.

Sam Shepard

Sam Shepard
my ideal man
I've even seen him
on the cover of his own book
his poems are wild
I'm in love with Sam,
should I write to him?
But what would I write?
I'll say I'm turning
seventeen soon.

I'll say this is a poor and muddy place
where Valio yoghurt just hit the shelves,
and on TV, they say women need
to cherish their fatherland more.
And someone died again
when the temperature dropped below freezing.
But how would Sam respond?
Would he go silent and stop writing poetry,
or would he pull his coat tight around him,
make coffee,
and keep writing?

Would I still love Sam
if he didn't stop writing then?

ELO VIIDING
TRANSLATED BY ADAM CULLEN