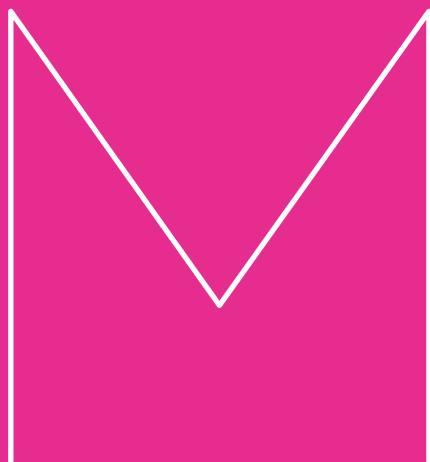
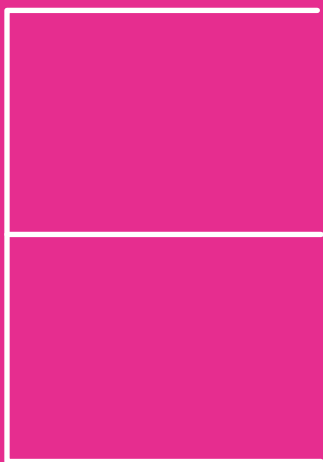


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On the Openness of Literature

by Jan Kaus

It isn't a stretch to assert that literature is an art of solitude. This especially true in comparison with other creative practices: many more individuals participate in the making of a play or a film than in writing a book. The fact that reading constitutes a writer's primary activity naturally amplifies the practice of literature as one of constant isolation. If we apply the military saying: "hard in training, easy in combat", then reading can be seen as an author's training and writing as their battle. At the same time, reading is bound to writing by its dual requirements of separation and seclusion. Watching a film is undoubtedly a much more fitting social activity than reading a novel.

But what if we inspect reading closer and more comprehensively? Isn't reading a book part of a greater uniting force – the ability to listen and truly hear? In this case, reading can be regarded as listening with one's eyes. In conversation, I often enjoy adopting the listener's role, because it is only superficially more passive than speaking. When listening to people and comparing their notions to your own, patterns composed of differences and generalizations will form.

Listening, including listening with one's eyes, is a form of openness. Why read an unusual book? To open yourself up to something unfamiliar. Rein Raud, a colleague, writer, and philosopher, has said: "People enjoy reading about that, which they are not." Whether a broadening will necessarily accompany openness is a question of its own, but it's clear that reading does not only mean the opening of a book, but that of a mind.

This openness is very important to me in a practical sense as well. Let me try to sum it up: I do not want to be a specialist. I'm referring here to José Ortega y Gasset, who wrote in his *The Revolt of the Masses*: "The specialist 'knows' very well his own tiny corner of the universe; he is radically ignorant of all the rest." I, in contrast, regard myself as a professional amateur. Naturally I am in no way satisfied with my own amateurism – on the contrary, the consciousness of my amateurism only amplifies a desire to find out more about a sweeping range of things, turning that desire into a perpetual fascination with the world. The world itself is made fascinating by the impossibility of ever fully



grasping it; by the fact that the spatial and temporal finite nature of the individual prevents them from experiencing reality as a whole. In order to be open to the inexhaustibility of the world and the diversity of human knowledge, and to broaden one's own openness, one must first comprehend the unsolvable natures of global discovery and self-broadening in turn. It is impossible to satisfy the dissatisfaction caused by the thirst for knowledge – only knowledge of the dissatisfaction can be satisfied.

As I mentioned earlier, openness matters to me, not only as an idea or an attitude, but also as a practice. *Practice what you preach. Put your money where your mouth is*, as they say. Truly – it's not simply *how* you think of the world that is important, but whether and how those thoughts are *executed*. Thinking is one thing, acting in accordance with those thoughts is another, and a step above that is *changing* your actions. That is why, slowly but surely, collaboration has grown in importance to me over time – exiting the solitude of writing, writing with someone else, writing in someone else's field of influence so as to entwine your worldview with that of another, searching for the overlap of different approaches and attempting to express that artistically. I've been involved in several supra-literary collaborations this year, one sample of which you can find in this very issue of *ELM*.

It began with Margo Orupõld, the charismatic and hardworking director of the Pärnu Women's Support Center, reaching out with a proposal to write a number of prose poems based on stories shared by women who have turned to the center for help. Margo wanted these tales of domestic violence to be told in an original, artistic

way. Since her daughter Flo Kasearu is currently one of Estonia's most unique and outstanding artists, she suggested we work on the book together. My poems and Flo's illustrations – two different styles of expression and manners of observation moving parallel in a common direction.

Yet aesthetic openness is not the only reason why I find collaboration with Margo and Flo to be so important. To this day, I've yet been unable to untangle the connections between a writer's social openness, creativity, and civic duty – I oscillate between serenity-seeking escapism and determined social combativeness. Every now and then, I step into public discussions, only to withdraw just as quickly as I came, because preaching isn't really my thing – I find it odd to teach people how to fly when you yourself occasionally crawl across level surfaces on all fours. I've reckoned the best way to influence society is by doing so “concentrically” – eschewing doing the things I publicly condemn when in the company of friends and loved ones. I acknowledge that part of this stems from my powerlessness before the magnitude of societal challenges. When I'm unable to fight the manufacturing of plastics, I clean up litter from the park across from my house or around the nearest bus stop. When I'm unable to have any impact on industrial water wasting, I, at least, conserve water at home. My wife is fondly entertained by my habit of pouring excess boiled water down the drainpipe from our skylight instead of into the sink, so that it runs through the gutters and down into the garden. Occasionally I donate money to one cause or another. To compensate for the destruction of Estonia's forests, I take precious care of the trees in my own garden and mournfully pat the birches and pines



JAN KAUS, FLO KASEARU AND MARGO ORUPÖLD · PHOTO BY PIIA RUBER

growing in the park. Microscopic, substitute actions such as those.

But then, opportunities also arise like the one that Margo offered. Ones that allow you to step into discourse, but to do so in your own element; to write on a topic that is extremely pressing and topical, one that makes my pulse quicken, and in facing I feel mostly powerless – domestic violence statistics are disheartening, to put it mildly. Nevertheless, I can present my stories to counter that violence. One may, of course, scoff that those stories have just as much of an effect as the half-liter of water I stop

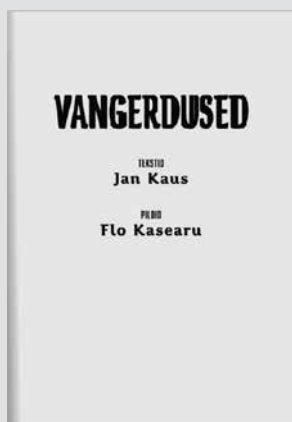
myself from pouring down the drain, at the same time as a nearby manufacturing plant is consuming thousands of tons of groundwater to produce plastic fire pokers. My act of resistance is one drop in the ocean. Yet I cannot help but to respond with the words with which David Mitchell concludes *Cloud Atlas*: “Yet what is any ocean, but a multitude of drops?”

JAN KAUS is a writer, essayist, and performer. Amidst his multitude of projects, Kaus is also a former editor of the *Estonian Literary Magazine*.

Sublimations

by Jan Kaus

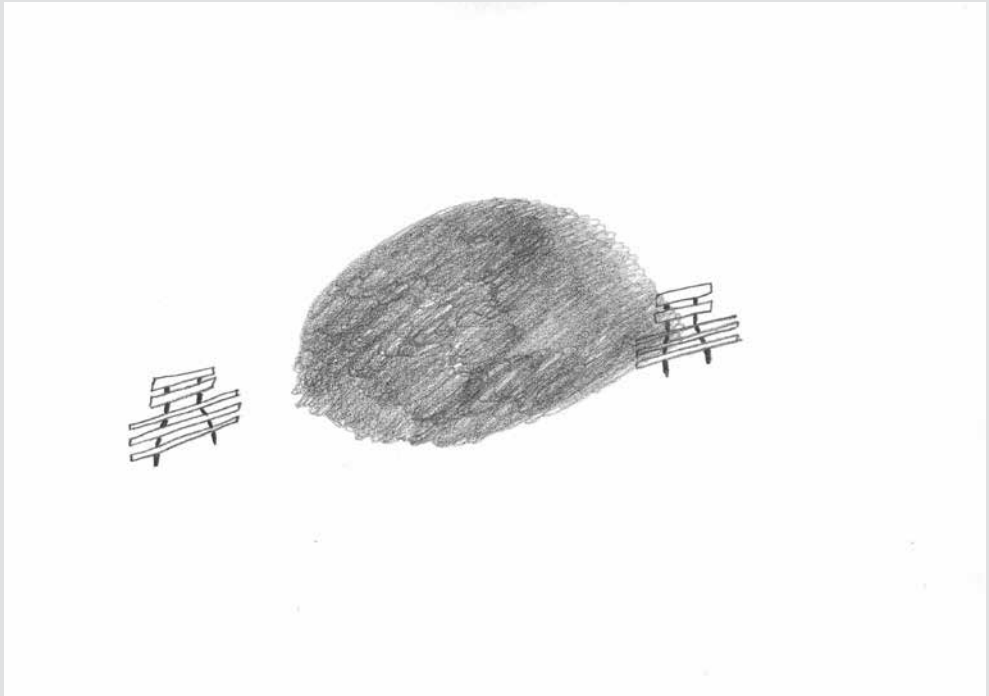
Excerpt translated by Adam Cullen



Sublimations by Jan Kaus, illustrations by Flo Kasearu. Pärnu Women's Shelter, 2020

X

There lived a man who was in the habit of saying: “Be what may, but may there be order at home!” The man believed that people were created to put the world in order. Nature is, of course, a terrible mess and clutter – all one has to do is walk into an untamed forest and observe the chaos that reigns. Therefore, it was no wonder that the man wanted to see order in his own home as well. He believed his home was his castle – a bastion of order meant to withstand the attacks of the chaotic world. True, he himself didn’t like to tidy up, but that was what his wife and children were for. The man’s own domestic affairs were also in perfect order: he issued commands and the rest of his family carried them out. To him, there was nothing more important than his family’s readiness to fight chaos in the name of cleanliness. The man even believed it necessary to regularly sow disorder at home to see how fast his family could restore order. Sometimes he flung an open pack of butter onto the floor, other times he unplugged the refrigerator or forced a roll of toilet paper down the toilet and then flushed repeatedly. Then, he would issue a clear command to his wife or children to take care



of the mess. The man found it thoroughly entertaining to watch the way his wife or offspring restored order at a breakneck pace. He viewed himself as something akin to a teacher. Occasionally, the man would invite his friends over. They would throw an iron through a window or dump jam into the washing machine, then crack open a bottle of vodka and watch how competently or incompetently his family resolved the issues. Sometimes, the man used a stopwatch to keep from getting bored. His oldest son set very good records, so the man came up with prizes for the boy – such as permission to drive the man to the nearest shop to buy vodka. The boy was a very proficient driver and whenever he violated a traffic law, the only punishment he received was a retributive slap on the back of the head. One time, the two left home to buy a fresh bottle of vodka. The man climbed out of the car, made his purchase, and then decided to

take the first swig to clear his mind around the corner of the store. Somehow, the man ended up drinking more than he'd planned to and dozed off. When he awoke, the bottle was empty and all he could hear was silence. The man staggered back to the parking lot and saw his worthless son must have sped off in the car. Then, the man noticed there weren't any cars in the parking lot at all. So, he plodded home through the desolate city. When he arrived, there was no one there either. The man picked up his phone and called his friends. Not one of his buddies answered. Over the course of a week, it became clear that the man was completely alone in the world. Then, the electricity went out. The man locked the doors and drew the curtains tight. A year later, it was plain to see that nature was laying claim to the world once again – chaos was taking hold and there was nothing the lone man could do about it.

It's hard to think of anything better than a good book

An interview with Mudlum

by *Maia Tammjärv*

Mudlum (Made Luiga) is a rising star on the Estonian literary scene. She made her debut in 2014 with the short-story collection *Tõsine inimene* (A Serious Person). Published the following year was her “burlesque story collection” *Ilus Elviira* (Pretty Elviira), then the novella collection *Linnu silmad* (A Bird's Eyes, 2016) and the essay collection *Ümberjutustaja* (Reteller, 2017). Last year, Mudlum released the novel *Poola poisid* (Polish Boys), which has already earned her both this year's Award for Prose from the Cultural Endowment of Estonia and the European Union Prize for Literature. Her latest novel is also directly tied to the ZA/UM cultural movement's role-playing video game *Disco Elysium*, which won a stunning four categories of The Game Awards in 2019, and, in 2020, has been awarded for its narrative in the D.I.C.E. Awards, the Game Developers Choice Awards, the SXSW Gaming Awards, and the British Academy Games Awards. Allow me to welcome you into Mudlum's world.

The last time we chatted, it was 2015 and your second book had just been published – *Pretty Elviira*. Back then, I asked if you saw yourself as a real author, and you replied you didn't think so yet – I believe you even said you don't know how to write in the sense that you don't know what's right, what's customary, etc., but you also remarked that you actually see that as an advantage. How do you feel now? Are you a writer? Do you know how to write already?

Questions should provoke, shouldn't they! It's hard to pry an honest answer out of myself. I could start way back from square one, asking what a writer is in the first place and whether they're any kind of a marvel. A relatively honest answer would be that I myself am amazed that people see me as a writer and wonder where it all came from so quickly out of the blue, and why. I suppose I have started developing some very basic artisan skills, but I still know nothing about composition and couldn't write a thriller or a crime novel. On the whole, my writing





comes as it may and after it does, I feel just miserable wondering why it turned out the way it did and if I couldn't have written something better.

I ultimately titled that long-ago interview “A total outsider from life itself”, and at the time that “outsider’s” perspective did seem quite dominant. Like you weren’t really a part of the inner circle and were distant from the literary public, so to say. But looking at it on paper now, one could even say you’re starting to settle in nicely! You’ve already received two very prestigious awards for *Polish Boys*, for instance!

True, what can I really say? Does a writer write for the inner circle, for themselves, or for the reader? I suppose it’s a little for all three. The fact that people like me are

allowed to settle in must mean the inner ring isn’t hermetic. But the outsider’s position is the only position possible for a writer. A writer is always removed from everything, observing from a distance and committing things to memory. They themselves don’t realize, of course, that they’re recording those things, or that they are specifically on the outside. The author is simultaneously present and removed – that’s the way I see it. Maia, could you maybe explain that inner ring to me a little? What do you think it is, exactly? Cultural leaders? People who are born to be writers, just as one is born into nobility? Or is it something else entirely?

You’re right – the inner ring isn’t hermetic. There’s no single one and I suppose you could even say it’s an illusion, for the most part; a mirage. Nevertheless, your debut in literature came later than usual – you did

publish a little on the ZA/UM blog earlier, but your first writing in print came only in a cultural periodical in 2012 and with your first book in 2014. Why was that?

Now, we're really getting into it. What does "later than usual" mean? Some of my poems were published in *Pioneer*¹. Isn't that good enough? All my life, I've had to listen to people say that I'm too old for something; that I've missed my chances – it started when I was about 22. Too late! Too late! Writing isn't really the sort of career you can pick fresh after graduating from high school. I can give you a myriad of examples of authors who started God knows how late – later than me, in any case! I was 43 when I randomly started writing again. That didn't make me much of a fossil. I'm actually glad it didn't happen earlier. For some reason, I feel like it's an Eastern European thing – choose your path and stay on it, don't leap over the ditch.

But here's how it went: I had a kid at a young age, then I worked all kinds of jobs to keep bread on the table, then I had another kid, I casually stuffed two useless college degrees into my assets column, but the things that wanted to happen all happened without my personal involvement. ZA/UM was formed – I played no part in its creation. They let me take a peek at whatever they were doing and start writing myself after a while. The first piece I wrote for them was titled "Mudlum and work", which was a result of some promise I once made in a comment saying, okay, I'll tell you what it's like to work.

1 *A Soviet Estonian youth magazine, similar versions of which were published throughout the USSR. (Editor)*

Right for your guns, huh! What I meant was not that you started writing books too late, but rather it seems like sometimes, people start writing too early! I suppose that's a sign of a small literary market like Estonia's no doubt is – getting published is a cinch. On the one hand, it's great because everyone has the opportunity to be published and it's democratic, but on the other hand...

Of course I went right for my guns – that topic really gets under my skin. I enrolled in university at the age of 24 and the first thing they asked in my interview was: isn't it just a little bit late for you? You finished high school such a long time ago. Your 25th birthday was already like your life's funeral. At 30, you were too old for any position. Those were simply the times. In reality, I feel like I'm finally doing the right thing right now. Not necessarily by writing books, that is. I wasn't purposeful or determined about becoming a writer – it grew out of blogging, and I can also blame the editor of a cultural magazine who first started publishing my writing and later agreed to edit my book. I don't believe I'd have had the sense and fury to publish a book without that person's support. Maybe I'd have instead wanted to sit in the editorial office of some magazine, planning what would go to print and editing the submissions. I want to be inside of the writing. I realized that during my time at ZA/UM, when I ultimately ended up handling a very large part of the organizational work.

It hasn't always been so easy to publish, of course. But I don't think you necessarily have to start with the publications meant for young authors and then move forward at full throttle.

Polish Boys is somewhat of a strange book and there appear to be (at least) two quite dissimilar keys to reading it. What's more, one of them may only be accessible to readers previously familiar with Estonian culture, as the multidisciplinary ZA/UM movement is only fixed as a phenomenon in our cultural memory. Who are those Polish boys to you?

ZA/UM as a phenomenon in cultural memory – I don't think so. Most Estonians haven't even heard of it. That's also why I kept a very low profile when the book was published – I didn't directly tie the work to ZA/UM, because, when writing it, I was imagining all kinds of different cultural groups and movements both in Estonia and elsewhere – they always run off of idealism and ultimately crumble into internal disputes and conformism.

They are my characters. It's true that I copied them off of real prototypes, but they're still unique characters in the book and are not biographical. I started working on *Polish Boys* in 2015 and finished it in 2018, which was when the ZA/UM video game studio slowly started shifting to London. I had no idea they were doing so well and I certainly supported them, but I've actually fallen completely outside of that group of friends. I wasn't in the know about what they were doing, exactly. In February, I also finally got around to playing through *Disco Elysium* and discovered a ton of inside details which no one apart from a tiny inner circle can know or point out. There's even a character with the same name as one in my novel. To be completely honest, I reckon the game's sizeable international fandom would be happy to

crack open *Polish Boys*, too. For there are common denominators between the book and the game. I unobtrusively observed, noticed things, and wrote a novel in which I tried to generalize my observations. Still, it's the very same struggle between ideas and failures in both.

How on earth could I have known that the book would be published the same year as the EU Prize for Literature was announced? Both awards have come as a great surprise, as I don't see Polish Boys as my best work. Maybe because the writing process was so tough and agonizing.

ZA/UM's video game is truly a great example of how something strange and successful can emerge from the blending of borders and genres; how a kind of "out of the box" way of thinking can bear unexpected results. Something similar applies to your writing as well – you've always bound the everyday with the (loftily) literary; real life and fiction, etc. I'd ask instead, then – what do you see as your best work?

Yes, I'm also amazed by ZA/UM's conceptual framework – one which is so familiar to me – receiving such amazing global recognition. And they deserve it – *Disco Elysium* is an incredible game. Authors usually regard the latest thing they've done as their best. Something that's currently slated for publication. Writing is a path, and nothing can come before the time is right or in any other way than it does. Every book adds something new and deepens old topics.



MUDLUM · PHOTO BY PIJA RUBER

Why Poland? Why not Czechia or Slovakia, for instance? Is Polish culture dear to you in some way?

The Polish names are purely incidental and I can't even remember the actual inspiration anymore. I believe it was in 2013 that I wrote a short story titled "The Fair Madam

Ada Nosek and Her Boarder Sulisław Zawisza" for the ZA/UM blog. It was also published in my book *A Serious Person*. At some point, I started to reckon that I could maybe continue in that same vein, primarily because the story's feedback was pretty much like, well, what do you know – you *can* write about more than "just your own

life". It was a little deliberate, too, trying to see if you could trick people with silly little details like foreign-sounding names. I guess I got my comeuppance in the end, because I had a hell of a hard time placing the whole novel in Poland with some degree of credibility.

It seems like – and you can correct me if I'm wrong, of course! – you're an author who takes criticism to heart. Or maybe it's more exact to say that to me, you seem quick to find that critique fails to understand you, which gives the impression that you're often bothered by literary reviews even when others find them to be rather positive. At the same time, you yourself have also written critique. How does knowing the ins and outs of reviews affect you as an author receiving her own?

I took it to heart with my first books. I have, of course, occasionally raised an eyebrow when a reviewer comes up with a particularly peculiar train of thought. Having written and read so much literary critique myself, I unfortunately already know that it's unlikely any author is totally satisfied by any. It's exhausting to work on both fronts. On the one hand, you know the way an author feels expecting feedback, but on the other, as a critic, you're only really able to scrutinize a few individual aspects of the book. The review format is somehow outdated. It's good for an entirely different purpose; it's meant to achieve a systematic overview or coherence. I truly am a maniac about reading every book review that's published – I just like to. And yes, some are boring, some are negative, some are paeans, and some are practical,

talking more about trends in the literary scene than the given work when consuming them en masse that way. At the same time, you as an author are a person just like anyone else and are just waiting for someone to say something new; something compelling. And oftentimes they do, but the author's bond to their work is still too close; they haven't unraveled themselves from their writing. When I read a review of one of my old works five years later, for example, I can see that they were correct. Or maybe not correct, but I at least accept their angles of approach.

What makes you write? Why do some people write and others don't? There are authors who have said very dramatically that it's only worth writing when you're left with no other choice! And then there are authors who write like it was any other day job – one they've just stumbled into and have found they're good at, working from nine to five with a lunch break and then relaxing. How is it for you?

It's both ways. Some things did just happen at first. The lines started coming from who-knows-where. Then I started to write, and after that I even started getting paid money for it. It almost does give the impression that it's work, doesn't it? You can't write a novel by just sitting and waiting for the right mood to come – you've got to do a little manual labor, too, which definitely isn't always pleasant and can sometimes even be downright unbearable. I am literally afraid of new projects: once I start something, I can't leave it alone until it's finished, and even then it takes about a year or so until the work releases you and you can feel indifferent about it.

What is different about people who read compared with those who are far removed from literature?

More worlds, more reality, more beauty. It really is hard to think of anything better than a good book. A good book, even if my memory of it turns hazy a while later, leaves me with a cloud of emotions, something like a powerful aroma, and at just the right moment, it can all reactivate in my mind, creating connections and weaving a neural web between the heads of readers and writers all around the world – one too huge to grasp.

Do you associate reading with empathy? I've certainly given that a lot of thought lately. Though perhaps it's mainly children who need it – experiencing others' worlds and perspectives, living others' lives by reading... Perhaps we as adults should know how to do that instinctively.

That's too complex of a topic to break down here. Reading is an escapist activity, of

course. It entails closing yourself off from real life; it can even easily mean closing yourself off from feelings. You can find other worlds everywhere – just turn on your TV or laptop. Practically everyone wants to offer you some reality that's different from you lying in bed, covered in cookie crumbs. People have said that my writing is empathetic. I'm extremely doubtful of whether that empathy has also been actualized in practice. My problem in general is that I can never find clear answers to anything. I constantly see the possibility to make arguments both for and against every single issue – the world simply isn't so simple! Right now, I could probably write fifteen pages as a response, but maybe another time.

MAIA TAMMJÄRV is a culture journalist and literary critic who works as the cultural and research editor of the newspaper *Müürileht*. She enjoys British comedy and country music, is perpetually surprised, and consumes more coffee than most.



SCULPTURE OF MUDLUM BY MUDLUM · PHOTO BY PIIA RUBER

Polish Boys

by Mudlum

Excerpt translated by Adam Cullen



Polish Boys by Mudlum.
Strata Books, 2019

Man has the mind of an animal. Inside, he fails spectacularly to draw a line between a little fun and the misery of lifelong rearing and responsibility. Sure, he's well aware of where children come from, but good grief—how was he supposed to know it would go that way *that time*? In truth, it's entirely possible that no one ever really has a choice; that children *have* to come into the world in pairs or just unintentionally, and it's some sly artifice of predestination which catches them in its web—not carelessness or lust. The real miracle is when you do come across outstanding parents who respect each other and their children; parents who get together at a very young age but still finish their degrees alongside their parental duties, find work, gradually build up their careers, have more children, end up with a large family where the older kids help the younger ones, their grandparents show up to lend a hand, kind sorts of grandmothers who wear headscarves and aprons, all the children grow up and not at all crookedly in the process, the couple doesn't splurge but neither do they have any trouble making ends meet and everything they accomplish is accomplished well from start to finish, they do not make mistakes, they do not doubt, they do not veer off course.

Adam and Lilita's relationship had been rocky for a long time. They stuck together like an old married couple out of impuissance, powerlessness, and the inability to let go. They certainly made attempts: Adam gallivanted around with briefcase in hand, drinking wherever he may, and it wasn't

uncommon for girls to be hanging around his neck during those benders, either—some wild quality within him drew women close like a magnet, and it came as no surprise when one of them got knocked up. The girl made her own decision, not going to anyone for advice. Perhaps the bygone mandate that young women be accompanied by a chaperone was actually a very wise one, as it prevented them from ever being left anywhere unsupervised before wedding bells rang. Historically speaking, of course, only the well-to-do class had the time to shadow their daughters: the peasant and the gatherer had to keep an eye on themselves. And even once those bells toll, there begins a general era of anomalies, deception, and infidelity; one that trundles on until the partners' strength gives out and old age extends a rescuing hand.

Mother Ewa had seen Kasia before. She had been with Adam on one of his sporadic visits and she was acquainted with Kasia's parents through some distant contacts as well. Ewa liked the mild-mannered young woman. One day, she heard the news that Kasia had brought a healthy boy into the world. *Poor girl*, pani Ewa thought with a wave of sympathy. *So young and now, all alone with a child. Who was the bastard who knocked her up?* She felt a powerful urge to help in some way; to show her support. Although Ewa rarely left home, she now undertook the long journey to the farthest reaches of Warsaw where Kasia and her newborn were living with the girl's parents. *Dearie me—the girl hasn't even finished school yet!*

A veritable feast was laid out in the kitchen for her visit, which was unexpected. Ewa delivered her present, peeked in at the baby, spoke a few kind words, sat down with the family at the table, and enjoyed a delicious meal. Outside, the weak glow of a

winter's day seeped over the bare treetops and the hulking gray apartment blocks. It was the dreary type of weather in which everything looks strangely pocked. A wet snow had fallen over the hard crust which already encased the ground, dimpling its surface. Rimed crystals drifted lazily and the dappled air made the world look like a photographic plate peppered with nicks and smudges, grimy and foggy. Kasia's father, who was already quite elderly, sat across from Ewa. She noticed he was missing a number of fingers on one hand, though over time he'd learned to hold his fist in a way so as not to draw attention to it. The atmosphere in that tiny kitchen was somehow heavy and oppressive during the meal, though everything in the nursery was just as it should be: there was a crib with toys twirling above it, the baby's bottles were sanitized with boiling water . . . they would manage – that much was clear. Ewa even made a point of stressing that she'd be glad to help out with babysitting and advice should they need it. She felt a smidgen of pride for being such a good person.

As Ewa was pulling on her coat in the entryway and the family stood in a formal line to say goodbye, Kasia's mother remarked: "Oh, it was so awfully nice of you to come. You have our deepest gratitude. And tell Adam he can come and see the baby, too."

"Of course," Ewa casually replied.

It was only once she had crossed the soggy ground, boarded the bus, and was staring out its window with both hands clutching the curved black straps of her purse that realization struck her like a lightning bolt and the world swam before her eyes.

Adam was the child's father. And she had only figured it out now, the old fool that she was.

A leap of faith with a cartoonist

by Mari Laaniste

Joonas Sildre's graphic novel *Between Two Sounds: Arvo Pärt's Journey to His Musical Language* was published in Estonian in the autumn of 2018. Sildre is one of very few Estonian artists whose primary tool has been, for nearly 20 years, the hybrid medium of comics – an art that combines pictures and words, thereby creating something greater than the sum of its parts.

Between Two Sounds was the first time that Sildre explicitly used the term graphic novel, which designates a freestanding comics work of 100 pages or more.¹ No doubt it was fitting to spotlight this label, given how slim Estonian comics culture has historically been. Still, whether or not the book should essentially be regarded as Estonia's very first in the genre is a question of interpretation: it certainly surpasses earlier candidates in terms of volume (224 pp.), but at the same time, original comics have been published in that quantity in Estonia before, even as far back as the 1970s – no matter that they were primarily aimed towards children.

Sildre himself has also published children's comic books before. The Pärt project, which sprung from genuine fascination and was in progress for more than a decade, in no way restricts its readership in terms of age,

either. The concept of “comics about Arvo Pärt” (which the book basically represents) may sound amusing, and the outcome is humorous at times, but Sildre's intention is not humor alone, and the book should not be prejudged as frivolous simply due to its format. Rather, *Between Two Sounds* is an impressively meticulous biographical study that boldly synthesizes multiple cultural spheres. It illustrates the development of Arvo Pärt's personality and musical language, his perilous path in terms of both health and career, and his complex spiritual and creative quests up until the year 1980, when the Pärt family, dangerously disfavored by the Soviet regime, was finally forced to emigrate.

The biographical narrative's source material, which is presented mainly in a classical linear style, was painstaking archival research and, once the project piqued the interest of its very inspiration, the personal recollections of Arvo and Nora Pärt themselves. Thus, *Between Two Sounds* is somewhat of an authorized autobiography and

1 The work's original title was *Between Two Sounds: A Graphic Novel About Arvo Pärt*.



JOONAS SILDRE · PHOTO BY EERO VABAMÄGI / SCANPIX

has aroused some doubts over whether the author perhaps allowed himself to be too limited by his subject's interference. On the other hand, close consultation with the Pärt family helped to prevent numerous rumors, urban legends, and plain untruths about the composer from making it into print. Even in their absence, the book includes several striking episodes of Pärt's often eccentric endeavors, though dozens of pages were ultimately weeded out of the fact-checked material and it cannot be deemed all-encompassing. For example, the period in which Pärt made a living by composing film soundtracks comes off as a somewhat embarrassing detail in the story, even though *Ukuaru Waltz* – perhaps his most well-known and beloved piece in Estonia – is of that very genre. It was, however, necessary to trim some facets so that the volume and tempo of the book would fit within

reasonable bounds, and that the reader would not be distracted from the main axis of the story – a talented composer's creative block and ultimate spiritual and musical rediscovery of himself, which leads him in turn into an unresolvable conflict with the Soviet regime.

In Estonia's relatively sparse comics landscape, *Between Two Sounds* is a remarkable achievement even when considered as its simplest element – as a straightforward graphic biography – similar works about the lives of cultural greats are published by the dozen in Western Europe, but this is the first of its kind in Estonia. Yet what also makes the book stand out on the international literary scene is its artistic contribution: Sildre shapes the biographical content into a form that cleverly and creatively utilizes the opportunities the comics medium

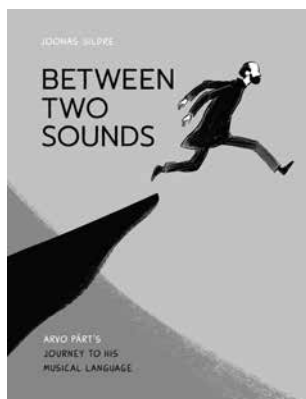
has to offer – one in which the (re)presentation of mundane scenes alternates smoothly with more abstract, intuitive segments.

The author's practiced style of visual expression is nearly ascetic, excluding everything excess – even the color palette is crisp and barely extends beyond monochrome (and, it must be mentioned, this visual simplicity and focus purely on the essential is in discrete harmony with the music that served as the work's inspiration). Great care is given to the accurate portrayal of historical and spatial details, buildings in Tallinn and other sites the protagonist visits, as well as the numerous secondary characters of greater or lesser celebrity in Estonian music, as is fitting for a biography. However, instead of limiting himself to the adequate composition of visual aesthetics, Sildre takes a giant step further: the cornerstone of the entire book is, in fact, its conceptual solution, through which he manages to conjure the world of sound and its emotional force in his drawings – an aspect, without which Pärt's story would be almost unfathomable. The author devised a simple, genius answer to the question: how do you depict the undepictable, i.e. sounds? From the very beginning of the book, Arvo Pärt is accompanied by an abstract black dot akin to a single note, which visually symbolizes a limitless range of sounds as well as the human soul more broadly. Throughout various scenes, this dot can swell into a crescendo bombing a packed concert hall or shrink nearly out of existence, such as when representing the repressed sobs of an unknown guest in the stairwell on the eve of the Pärts' exile. In moments of passion, spiritual self-discovery, and divine recognition, a flash of light may spark within the black dot. And it is in the book's more abstract sections that

depict Pärt's inner monologue and his spiritual and creative quests – points at which the character detaches entirely from the real world – where Sildre's virtuosity in his medium truly shines. Any attempt to recreate this same effect in a genre other than comics would seem impossible.

Between Two Sounds offers a simultaneously entertaining and enjoyably readable overview of the distinguished Estonian composer's life (one that was absent in the literary format before), as well as an independent, deeply meditated, and unabashedly spiritual artistic experience of sometimes semi-epic proportions. Its release in the autumn of 2018 coincided with the opening of the Arvo Pärt Center in Laulasmaa, which also acted as the book's publisher (since, to be honest, few established Estonian publishers would scramble to purchase the rights to an original graphic novel manuscript). As such, from a purely superficial perspective, one could find fault with the book's business interests and the author's scant critique of his subject – one wittier review rightly called it a “hagiographic novel”.² It is a fact that Sildre's devoted, research-based approach to Pärt's story is unvaryingly reverent. At the same time, he has achieved a sensorially genuine and engaging result that transcends the typical bounds and frameworks of Estonian culture. Dry numbers and the feedback given by readers – children and seniors alike – both confirm the book's ability to connect to a broad audience; even one previously unfamiliar with the genre. Contrary to all

2 *Ave Taavet*, “Hagiograafiiline roman Arvo Pärdist”. *Vikerkaar*, July 2019, <https://www.vikerkaar.ee/archives/24598>



BETWEEN TWO SOUNDS. ARVO PÄRT'S JOURNEY TO HIS MUSICAL LANGUAGE
BY JOONAS SILDRE. ARVO PÄRT CENTRE, 2018.

expectations, the book became a bestseller and even surpassed popular new domestic novels in terms of sales. A second print run was released just a couple of months after the first, and a third has now been added in 2020. The Estonian media's reception of *Between Two Sounds* was similarly unprecedented and wide-ranging for a graphic work, with the overwhelming majority of reviews being positive.

In the context of Estonian literary and comics history, *Between Two Sounds* will additionally be remembered for being the first work of its kind to be considered for national cultural awards: it was nominated for the Cultural Endowment of Estonia's Award for Inter-Disciplinary Projects, and Sildre was a candidate for the 2018 Republic of Estonia's Cultural Award for Creative Achievements. As a graphic novel, the work has so far only received moderate recognition outside of Estonia, simply because there are no comics awards issued in the country. Even as an unfinished project, *Between Two Sounds* was nominated for an award at the 2016 East London Comic Arts Festival. In the spring of 2020, it received

special jury mention in the young-adult comics category of the BolognaRagazzi Award (part of the Bologna Children's Book Fair), along with the commentary: "[T] he judges loved the sheer confidence here: the idea that an esoteric creative life (albeit one of a national hero in Estonia) could be turned into a comic book. And it has a more serious, underlying theme in the Estonians struggle under Soviet occupation. It is beautifully drawn. Astonishingly, the artist has found a way to convey creativity, and all the difficulties it involves."³

The European comics market is, of course, much more extensive than Estonia's, which means that competition is intense and Estonian cultural heroes have a difficult time becoming convincing sales items for francophone and anglophone publishers. That being said, *Between Two Sounds* is slated to be published soon in German and Lithuanian translations. A full, print-ready English translation by Adam Cullen has even been integrated into Sildre's graphics – publishing rights are still available.

MARI LAANISTE is an art academic whose focus is visual- and pop-culture, with a primary focus on studying Estonian animation and comics. She occasionally writes reviews and, even more infrequently, prose.

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3 *Bologna Children's Book Fair. Comics – Young Adult 2020.* <http://www.bookfair.bolognafiere.it/en/highlights/awards/bolognaragazzi-award/bolognaragazzi-award-2020-winners/comics-young-adult-2020/10080.html>

ASSAMALLA, NEAR RAKVERE. ARVO IS AT HIS GRANDPARENTS' HOUSE AWAITING HIS MOTHER AND STEPFATHER.

1939



SHE'LL BE HERE SOON, ARVO DEAR! YESTERDAY WAS SATURDAY AND NOW THAT MUM IS NO LONGER UNEMPLOYED, SHE LIKES TO REST A LITTLE ON THE WEEKENDS.



IT WAS VERY NICE OF YOU TO ASK YOUR KINDERGARTEN TEACHER TO GIVE MUMMY A JOB. SHE WAS VERY MOVED BY THAT.



BUT TODAY IS SUNDAY, AND THAT MEANS IT'S TIME TO READ A LITTLE MORE FROM THE BIBLE. I'LL READ YOU A STORY WHERE A MUM IS AWAITING A CHILD, INSTEAD!





1968

TOOMAS AND I ARE DOING A NEW YEAR'S PERFORMANCE. WOULD YOU LIKE TO COME?

I DON'T KNOW. I'M NOT REALLY IN THE MOOD.

IT'LL BE GOOD FOR LIFTING YOUR SPIRITS. OTHERWISE, EVERYONE WILL THINK YOU'VE BECOME A HERMIT.

LET'S GRAB A FEW CHEAP VIOLINS FROM THE DEPARTMENT STORE.

AT THE WRITERS' HOUSE. KULDAR SINK, TOOMAS VELMET, AND ARVO PÄRT.

ALLOW ME TO INTRODUCE A VIOLIN. IT WILL BE OUR MAIN PROTAGONIST THIS EVENING.

FIRST, A SMALL DONATION ... ONLY CHANGE, PLEASE.

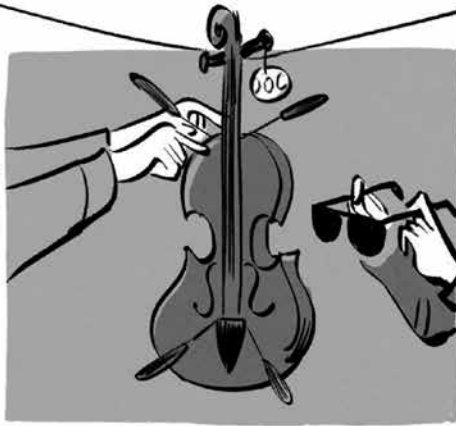
IT'S RATTLING QUITE NICELY ALREADY.

BUT NOW TO THE OPERATING TABLE. WHERE DOCTOR PÄRT WILL CONTINUE!

ARVO PÄRT CENTER



AND NOW, SINCE IT WAS JUST NEW YEAR'S, OUR PROTAGONIST MUST BE DECORATED AS IS ONLY PROPER!



WE'RE NOT GOING TO GET OUT OF THIS MESS SO EASILY. LISTEN: "WHEREAS IN AMERICA, THEY SMASH GUITARS, WE'VE GOTTEN TO THE POINT OF TORCHING VIOLINS."



DON'T WORRY. I'LL WRITE A CONVINCING LETTER OF EXPLANATION.

NO DEVIATIONS FROM MORAL OR ETHICAL NORMS TOOK PLACE DURING THE PERFORMANCE. ONLY A FEW FIRE-SAFETY RULES WERE VIOLATED: SPARKLERS WERE PLACED TOO CLOSE TO A PAIR OF SUNGLASSES, WHICH CAUSED THE VIOLIN TO UNEXPECTEDLY CATCH FIRE.

KULDAR SINK ARVO PÄRT JANUARY 16, 1968

What is it that I don't remember?

An interview with Carolina Pihelgas

by Siim Lill

Carolina Pihelgas's books usually appear quietly, without fuss or commotion, at moderate intervals, and blossom into thrilling experiences that deepen with every new reading. Lastingly. Pihelgas's poems are multidimensional and reflect personal encounters, spaces, and flashes of memory. It's easy to relate to the images they conjure; to the touching scenes. She has so far published six poetry collections, the latest of which – *Valgus kivi sees* (The Light Within the Stone, 2019) – received this year's Award for Poetry from the Cultural Endowment of Estonia.

Your poetry collections create a collective image; they possess a strong common thread, at least for me. How do you feel? Do your works possess binding links in addition to their independent wholes?

Every book is an independent whole, but they are also traversed by certain recurring keywords. I try to arrive at a new focus with every collection – thematically, linguistically, sensorially – though that new course may also be faintly perceived in each preceding work. They're not sharp twists, for the most part, but smooth transitions. You might say that the two most lasting cores of my poetry are body and memory. The body as a human expression of existence – sensory, but still mysterious. And then memory as a broad space of perception that connects to personal universality, cultural

memory, and the memory of species. These two cores are joined in turn by myth, which always leads you back to the beginning, to birth, to human nature through patterns and repetitions.

For me, some of the most powerful examples of corporality in poetry are the works of Alejandra Pizarnik – her dark, dense poems, which probe the peripheries of being, the person, and their shadow. My poetry also has quite a lot of nocturnal states of mind – one of my book titles is *Details of Darkness*. I relish the way in which dim light melts boundaries; how night is dark like intestines, and one can only guess at what it is capable of doing.

Recollections, memories, that which has been – all play a special part in your poems. Your poetry isn't merely



CAROLINA PIHELIGAS · PHOTO BY RUUDU RAHUMARU

an attempt to capture a moment, but is ever intertwining with the past. Why is that? Does writing help you better understand what came before now? Or is it driven by an effort to record something fleeting?

Writing definitely helps understand things better. It is a tool for observing and interpreting, just like any creative activity. What is the present, anyway? An instant instantaneously becomes the past. I've always been more interested in digging into the labyrinthian archives of memory than running around with a butterfly net. I am, of course, amazed by those who are able to sketch a

future and create parallel worlds – one of my favorite authors when I was young was Ursula K. Le Guin, for instance.

The Light Within the Stone is a book about the possibility of remembering, but it is just as much about the possibility of forgetting. It's about landscapes and places that may have been physically destroyed or transformed beyond recognition, but which nevertheless persist in the space we call memory. Poetry is tightly bound to silence – sometimes, the most important parts of it are pauses and gaps – and it's the same with memory. I'd like to ask: what is it that I don't remember? How can I fill my

existence with the emptiness that surpasses language; which might sharpen my words and syllables? Writing certainly has its share of drive to record; of pleasure in and a thirst for language. Sometimes, language itself will guide you in the right direction; language should be trusted.

In addition to writing, you translate and have also studied the anthropology of religion. How do these different facets make contact within you? I'm particularly intrigued by your ideological persuasion, if that's not too personal of a question. I feel that your poems radiate a certain animism. That which surrounds you is not simply a collection of things. Human lives and emotions have been stored within them. The line between animate and inanimate is, at some points, diaphanous. And you also take note of the nature around you, which is in no way self-evident.

Often, I wish I could break out of the anthropocentric model. I certainly harbor an intimacy with the animist worldview and, for me, nature isn't just an environment that happens to surround us. The sacredness of springs, trees, and stones in traditional Estonian beliefs intuitively echoes with me somehow. Stones are a recurring inanimate object in my writing – great, unmoving, and ancient, yet still alive; there is an unfathomable substance to their existence. Among other subjects, I've been intrigued by object-oriented ontology – by the idea that things inherently exist, independently of humans and their senses; that their existence is not defined by human knowledge. It's possible that things possess their own unique perception. Yet this



is something we cannot know, because it's impossible in principle to ever fully comprehend the substance of any one thing. From here, we can go right back to the question of memory, because memories are closely tied to spaces and things, and things record memories within them. Bergson has questioned whether our memories lie within or outside of us. If we possess inside of ourselves mere traces through which we access memories, then couldn't it be possible that the memories themselves *are* outside of us? In the material world? In things? I've felt, however, that the best way to access the



CAROLINA PIHELGAAS · PHOTO BY RUUDU RAHMARU

world of memories is through language – poetry probes boundaries that are simultaneously internal and external, which is to say, central.

I find translating and writing to be rather closely tied. I translate poems, for the most part, and since commissioned poetry translations come rarely, I work primarily on authors who mean something to me in one way or another; authors who inspire, and whose writing I want to share. I've translated poetry by classics like Neruda and Cavafy, Norwegian poetry by the great

Tor Ulven, but also contemporary authors, of course; currently, I'm translating Sylvia Plath and Sappho. Translating is true intensive reading – it requires total absorption and coalescence to phrase writing in a new language in a way that is essentially the same, but also a little different every time. As Borges said, the original never remains faithful to the translation. Translation involves intense attention to language, which is especially important during the times when I'm not writing all that much myself.

You are this year's Tartu City Writer Laureate, which is still quite a novel title in local Estonian culture. What new doors has the role opened for you, and how can an author foster urban life? Doesn't carrying out your official duties restrict your literary freedom and time?

There are no specific assignments for the city writer laureate – there is only the hazy horizon of expectations. The way I've interpreted this is by being present in the city; by living and working there, but also accentuating that presence with performances and public appearances. Most events were cancelled this spring because of the pandemic; some were moved online, but only a few. It was certainly a shame to miss them, but breaks like those can be positive, too – it allowed me more time to write, in any case.

The relationship between a writer and a city has a reciprocal effect, and that feeling is amplified even further as a city writer laureate: on the one hand, the city provides my writing with scenery and ambiance – a metaphor or fragment of poetry often stems from something I see or perceive in that space; yet on the other hand, I myself am a part of that city. When the streets emptied and people withdrew into their homes this spring, I sought out an opportunity to intervene in the urban space in a literary way. And although the idea to install audio-poetry dispensers around the city was postponed, poetry graffiti was still stenciled onto sidewalks this summer.

You've been involved with the alternative literary magazine *Värske Rõhk* for several years. One could say that the magazine has played a defining

role in discovering new writers and delivering them to a wider audience. What, in your opinion, is the current state of fresh and youthful poetry? Is the complaint that today's youth have nothing to say simply the eternal clash between old and new, or do you feel that the world is different than it was before?

The notion that it's possible to say anything completely new is an illusion. Yes, language changes, the world changes, and the way we perceive the world changes as well, but are humans really all that different in nature? We're still shadowed by fancies, fears, emotions, and aspirations. We can read Sappho and identify with her yearning and rage when she says that love is a "sweetbitter unmanageable creature who steals in". What fascinates me about literature above all is how vividly and precisely something can be said, how deeply the author manages to delve – "novelty" is secondary, though there is always something astonishingly new in every unique voice. I'm always fascinated when someone does find a new and unexpected perspective or way of wording something. I think that among the younger generation, there are very many exciting and important new poets with a deft style and broad scope who have stood out recently. You could say, rather, that there are very few young novelists in Estonia; especially young female novelists. Perhaps the complaint that literature (or youth, or what have you) is doomed is simply a byproduct of apathy? I suppose literature does wear me out from time to time too, which is always a good point to focus on something else for a while.

Should the role of literature change, given the current state of the world?

Lately, many literary visionaries have remarked that writing's one and only role is to heal; that in these conditions, it's no longer possible to make art for art's sake. Something like the role set out for the avant-garde literary movements of the early 20th century, which addressed the surrounding chaos forcefully. What do you think that relationship between the personal and the broad, purely aesthetic, and healing could be?

The role of literature has always been to heal, among other things. High-quality literature is multidimensional and multilayered, and offers an individual and social perspective simultaneously. Ene Mihkelson's *Ahasveeruse uni* (The Sleep of Ahasuerus), in which the reader accompanies the protagonist on a nightmarish journey to discover the truth about how the character's partisan father was killed, is not just a novel about the "singularity of the way an individual perceives the world", but also explores the Soviet regime's brutal systemic manipulation of memory and history, which left a painful mark on everyone who lived under the occupation. László Krasznahorkai's *Satantango* speaks not only about the oppressive atmosphere in communist Hungary, but, as the author himself has commented, is "about the world at a deeper level". But, just as not every medicine is meant to treat all illnesses, so might the power of literary therapy greatly depend on what ails the reader. The climate crisis isn't especially pronounced in Estonian literature, but this might be partly because it's such a complex issue – a 'hyperobject', to use Timothy Morton's term. What does acutely concern Estonians right now, however, is the state-sponsored ravaging and

destruction of its forests, which Hasso Krull has described in his poem "The Woods".¹

The avant-garde literary movements of the early 20th century were extremely aesthetic, and surrealists arrived at a new language, which they used to interpret the great and terrible experiences of that era. The way that we interpret these new crises, new wars, and the wave of mass extinction still needs to be explored. As we do, focus should certainly be turned towards authors from Africa, Asia, and Latin America, and especially towards female voices.

How about the usual question about your future plans? What projects are you working on and what can your fan club expect to come?

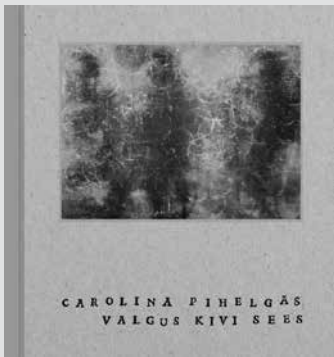
This autumn, I'll be publishing a collection titled *Tuul polnud enam kellegi vastu* (The Wind Was No Longer Against Anyone), which includes poems from the period 2006–2020. Hasso Krull compiled the selection and penned an afterword. In addition to poems already published in other collections, there are some which appeared in magazines and even a few unpublished ones. As for translations, the *Loomingu Raamatukogu* series will be publishing my Estonian translation of *Deaf Republic* by one of the most notable contemporary American poets, Ilya Kaminsky.

SIIM LILL is an autonomous expert.

1 A video of Krull reading the poem with English subtitles can be viewed at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aMue3Y4Gv80>

The Light Within the Stone

by Carolina Pihelgas
Translated by Adam Cullen



THE LIGHT WITHIN THE STONE
BY CAROLINA PIHELGAS.
KAASIKHAMMAS, 2019

ON SPACES

Sometimes it seems like everything begins with departures. That not distances, but spaces, are what matters. Their loss is even more difficult than growing apart from others: the strange and unsettled smell of new places, a history that does not remember you. The body knows other stairs, turns, corners; has recorded the total delicacy of movement. And this remains true even years later, for the body never bumps against the sharp corner of the kitchen cupboard in dreams. The poesy of frayed wallpaper edges, creatures born of peeling paint, worlds told in stories. Everything we left behind, akin to refugees' possessions—nonexistent, and thus our own. Hands that left mugs, spoons, heels of bread forgotten upon the table. Clouds drifting over the house, the music of table legs, the dust of old books that recorded the endless babbling of days. Language, then, like the lace of dollies on the dresser: old and gossamer.

BENEATH THE ROOTS

Alone in this world. I look around, no one. Only dust drifts in a beam of sunlight, the patterns on old textiles and pillows speak of perpetuity. A child may only speak of her sadness to the gooseberry bush and the red ants who take all the words with them beneath the pine roots. If someone happens upon her haven, she turns into a scarecrow on a field—one whose sleeves unravel in the wind, whose mouth was left undrawn.

Mother is a goddess with a broom and a dustpan, lady of the kitchen, and Father is always away somewhere, a giant buried beneath book dust and punched cards. Nothing is ever in excess, neither time nor love. There were sandwiches on the kitchen table, mice skittering in the attic, clouds that pressed a broken-melody imprint upon our eyelids.

TO WRITE

I'm unable to write about great tragedies, which is why I write about lesser ones: hands' dim light in an afternoon tanned by voices, a memory that no longer seems to truly belong to you, softly dying love, packed items, hastily-written labels. And waiting, that incessant cellar-musty expectation which gleams just as distinctly in the first light as soldiers' boots during morning inspection.

The sun's curved rays reflect off a metal bowl: flashes from a time that should be a museum but is a cell. Cranes trumpet up above, their sound has something to tell us: the horizon splits and settles into the viewer's wide-open eyes.

A BLIND ROVER

To extend all the way to warm and fragile luminousness; to that, which glows like a damaged world. To sense its flickering; to believe that what is glimpsed there is for real.

You are a blind rover. Legs broken, but other ornaments preserved. Lips parted in amazement, body fractured like an old language. Your knowledge is this: clay is more definite than the horizon, bones more lasting than dreams. You press your hands against your breast, against your body, which now belongs more to the air than to the soil.

We stand behind glass. The stone's tenderness will not let us go.

4+4

A conversation between the poets Elo Viiding and Kristjan Haljak

Elo Viiding's debut poetry collection *Telg* (Axis) was released in 1990; her fifteenth and latest collection *Ainult armastusest* (Just About Love) in 2019. Kristjan Haljak came into the world in the same year as Viiding's first collection and made his poetry debut in time – *Palavik* (Fever) was published in 2014. His newest poetry collection, *Illuminatsioonid* (Illuminations), should be released in 2020.

To mark this anniversary year, ELM invited these two colorful poets to sit down and chat about poetry and, naturally, how it has changed over time. Not to mention all the other topics, which matter to them.

Kristjan interviews Elo

It's been 30 years since your first poetry collection was published. I believe I wouldn't be off the mark in saying that the purpose and function of poetry has changed to some degree for both you and society over that period. If that is true, then how? If not, then – how?

For me, what's remarkable is what people agreed with then, and what is common and customary now. For example, when I wrote on social topics nearly twenty years ago – and my poems were often freestanding little statements on the societal climate, dominant morale, mentality, and political situation – I was condemned, ridiculed. I don't know if that meant life was so

wonderful that writing social critique was almost seen as an inappropriate act; that poetry should express something loftier than the mundane and look nobly inward (or be nobly evasive) – we had only just achieved “independence”, etc. Naturally, many authors before me, and contemporaneously with me, wrote on social themes, punk literature, and resistance literature, but apparently I did so in a style that didn't sit well with readers and critics: I didn't want to court them with warm humor, but instead tended towards irony, was biting, non-traditional, and that bothered them. One time, I expressed the opinion that poets should receive greater pay for their work when publishers make money off their poems in the run-up to Christmas (i.e. Christmas anthologies on themes of friendship, love, etc.) Demands like those



KRISTJAN HALJAK AND ELO VIIDING · PHOTO BY PIIA RUBER

weren't good form back then. A poet didn't speak of money.

Today, some of the people who mocked me now approve of the changes. Nowadays, you're allowed to ask more money for your work! There is even a state writer's salary, which is basically just a three-year grant and has stirred up so much commotion, as if it were an award.

There are never any big sums in literature. And it goes without saying that an author is paid the same amount for several months of work as, for example, what a car repairman, bank teller, or even a teacher receives in a month. Poetry and quality literature, as a whole, were like a charity before (and still are now, to an extent, if you look at the fees paid to authors); they've always been somehow loftier than life itself, and that's just the way they're treated.

Have there been any times when you've felt like poetry doesn't work? Like you no longer have the desire, need, or urge to write another poem?

Of course there have been times when I've felt it doesn't work, but for some reason I always still feel a need to write. At moments like those, I pick up a poet who is very special to me – currently, I've been reading Paavo Haavikko exclusively. I managed a project to translate his poetry into Estonian, which followed another project I directed to publish Pentti Saarikoski in translation. That sense is fleeting. To me, Haavikko's "field of possibility" is exceptionally motivating. It puts my own writing to work, so to say.

A poet's ethics, their core beliefs, which I can perceive in the air, matter more to



me than their linguistic acrobatics or the transparent tricks they use to try to gain popularity.

I like the way you occasionally poke fun at the "role" of the poet – or at least a certain romantic, bourgeoisie myth of the poet wound up in alcoholism, degeneration, and practicing a bohemian lifestyle. Would you agree



ELO VIIDING AND KRISTJAN HALJAK · PHOTO BY PIIA RUBER

with the argument that society means to domesticate rebellion by way of that image or myth – i.e. the poet becomes a fool, an eccentric, whose words and acts aren't to be taken seriously?

Thank you. I do agree.

One thing that's always bothered me at literary festivals is this: whereas an actor's

high point is taking the stage at an exact time, writers are thoroughly exhausted before performing. Tote bags slung over their shoulders, they're forced to traipse from one venue or hotel to another, chat with the organizers, eat and drink right before their performance, wrestle with faulty microphones and nonexistent lighting, and worst of all, listen to others before their own turn at the mic, because etiquette

states that you have to listen to everyone's performance, even if it's tiresome or, let's be honest, insufferable rubbish.

I very much enjoyed the way things were organized in Oslo when I performed at one of their largest poetry festivals a decade ago, in connection with some of my poems being included in the global poetry anthology *Verden finnes ikke på kartet*. That experience will stay with me forever.

You were allowed ample personal time, given the choice to dine lavishly alone or with the others, were put up in a luxury hotel (the one where Ingmar Bergman's favorite room was), were able to do a proper dress rehearsal... And all to truly connect with the audience. *After* the performance was when you chatted and relaxed, listened to the others, and gave interviews. You were treated with respect; your work was important to the organizers. Everyone knew that you needed peace to focus and sufficient rest to think and get into the right mindset. You weren't expected to preoccupy yourself with other performances before your own, perspiring and holding your suitcase on your lap! I'm very grateful to the translator Irja Grönholm, who took me to various book fairs and festivals throughout Germany. I'm also grateful to my other translators – Turid Farbregd, Peeter Puide, Katja Meriluoto, Adam Cullen, and the unparalleled Eric Dickens, who sadly passed away. I'm glad they translated my poems because they felt some connection to them – I haven't been an obligation.

Critics have often noted threads of the psychoanalytical tradition in your works. Has learning the theories of Freud and Lacan, for example, caused

you to write differently? And even more importantly, has it changed the way you live your life?

People always search for connections – everything must somehow be tied to their own interpreted existential thread. My life has changed inasmuch as I've analyzed my actions and reactions in light of those theories; have adapted them to my personal relationships in order to avoid any greater catastrophes. There is simply no other way to interpret your life, childhood, and youth until you've come into contact with psychoanalysis. Not everyone needs it. Some people are just doers, analysis would cause them pain. They lack the inclination – simply living is enough.

If one is capable of acting as that machine for themselves (against themselves), then everything is fine. How can psychoanalysis be useful? Certainly not merely for literary games and nurturing self-love, but for liberating yourself of unnecessary emotional bonds, and foremost of naiveties. For being capable of acting for the good of yourself, others, or, ideally, society as a whole. Though one doesn't have to apply psychoanalysis to reveal simpler naiveties, of course.

Recently, I've been distancing more and more from seeing introspection as beneficial. Instead of psychoanalysis, I'm more interested in how a person can realistically act for the good of someone with fewer opportunities, be those spiritual, intellectual, or material. Not society – that's too narrow of a concept; society is made up of kindred thinkers who generally thumb their nose at others – but rather to do good for those who suffer from abandonment, socially in a certain sense, instead of delving

into yourself (and even into ideas). I'm striving to do that in this phase of my life.

Elo interviews Kristjan

Would you be interested in international fame, as much as that is possible in this lovely poetry-poor era? If you were to become world famous, then what topics would you focus on more broadly?

I certainly don't have to be too worried about unexpectedly acquiring the role of international opinion leader by writing my relatively cryptic and disengaged poems in a language with so few speakers. You couldn't say it's happened to any one of my poetic muses during their lifetime. Perhaps the early surrealists... Yet maybe even that was only in retrospect – during their glory days, they still were nothing more than communist henchmen on the political level. Even so, in that type of a hypothetical situation, I don't believe I'd start writing socio-political poetry more openly than I have already. Maybe in my own little way I would take a stand against ignorance, cruelty, and stupidity, both on the mental and the material level. And I'd promote that mild, soft decadence that dovetails so nicely with the ongoing ecological crisis. And of course I'd fight for love, erotic love, the love that the surrealists tended to call crazy.

Have you edited other authors' poetry, or would you like to? Or what is your view of the process in general – is it expansive, as a dialogue? Isn't editing an attack on the core of personality (if we are to acknowledge such

a construction?) Does a poet have a defining core in the first place?

I haven't edited anyone else, though I wouldn't feel a great aversion to doing so. I edit my own writing for quite a long time and enjoy the process. I've also observed that sometimes when you read poems in a slightly different state of mind, it's possible to notice melodic, symbolic, and structural details that you missed during the initial writing. A long, sound night's sleep or a couple hours' walk can be enough to evoke that change in consciousness. At the same time, I have to admit other people haven't edited my poems very much. I was helped in picking out the poems for my first two books, but no one besides me has had much of a say in it since then. If we were to delve into the topic of personality's core, it'd get much more complicated and require a longer discussion that weaves in psychoanalytical and philosophical theories. To keep things relatively short, we could play with the idea that there is no core to personality. There's a space in place of the conceptual core. Still, that doesn't mean personality or the subject as such doesn't exist. It does, but it is inevitably contradictory, multi-voiced, elusive. As a result I try to avoid an elite approach, as if the poet were somehow a more complex or perfect, centric or scattered individual than any other – of course, this does also raise the question of who is a poet and what is poetry, but let's leave that right there for now. I don't, in any case, believe that a poet necessarily understand themselves, their desires, their motives, or their acts any better. A poet can be just as complex or obtuse as anyone else.

You've taught literature and are also involved in translating, literary



analysis, and other similar activities. How do these different things interact for you? Do you see a connection between teaching and writing?

I believe that by teaching, you gain an unparalleled opportunity to shape, develop, and educate readers. To give them the codes they'll need to read the works people tend to see as "cryptic" in the framework of popular discourse. Translating, on the other hand, can be regarded as a form of writing – a translated poem is a new poem; just one

to which stricter restrictions apply and the intertextual level of which has been increased to a maximum. Literary analysis – i.e. writing about literature and delving deep into others' writing – helps you to gain a better sense of your own writing as well; it teaches you to break out of your intuitive conventionalism. I can't say if it helps you to write any better, but certainly more consciously.

What kind of poetry do you dislike? Is there any Estonian writing that is your credo, so to speak?



Lazy, boring, deficient poetry that tells me nothing new and fails to reshape the old in a way that captivates. Unfortunately, you can find poetry like that everywhere. Good poetry is incredible. Good poetry is equivalent to a religious, psychedelic, erotic experience in the very best and broadest sense. I'm convinced that kind of poetry is possible; that it exists. Otherwise I wouldn't attempt to write poems in the first place. I should add, of course, that poetry can sometimes appear lazy, deficient, or boring merely because the reader can't crack the

code. This does mean I've inevitably got to come to terms with the fact that some of my own poems might appear that way.

You were asked a strange question in one interview – why you published two books in a year. And you apologized, saying it was a fluke because the first book just took a little longer to finish. Do you have a certain work tempo? The experienced ideas or encounters, their processing, writing down the associations – how much time does it take you? Or does time even matter at all? Do you ever think of death?

I've contemplated that it's difficult, if not impossible, to write in extreme states of mind – when you're either too happy or too sad. Moderate melancholy is said to be the best for writing. That could very well be true. As a result, I can't say I work at any particular tempo. I certainly write a lot during certain periods, which are then followed by silence; by periods where I write almost nothing except maybe draft poems that look like failures at first. But later, it's possible for those fragmentary texts, those miscarried intentions to give rise to something provocative. I have several unfinished manuscripts right now, as well, and the one that's gone into layout and should be published very soon, which was actually started at least five years ago. As for publishing, I reckon that writers should indeed limit themselves to an extent, unfortunately. And death? I do think about death and I believe that good literature, good poetry of every sort should as well; that it should deal with death. It's all a part of that mystical-erotic experience that I connected to good poetry before. Truth be told, though, I mostly think about life.

Poetry by Elo Viiding and Kristjan Haljak

Translated by Adam Cullen

Elo Viiding

(From the collection *Just About Love*)

Girls' toys

These girls have no mothers;
the mothers are with the boys.
With the brothers who can never
get dressed or pull boots on themselves.
Mothers bear daughters,
push them before mirrors
so that they might be even more beautiful
and become even slimmer
and marry sons, themselves.
Girls have ponies and Barbies;
they love their own mothers
as they hug them to their chests.
Trotting into daycare on the heels
of mothers fed up with their crying daughters,
they hope to find their own princesses
in the drawer labeled:
“Girls’ Toys”.
Inside the drawer of girls’ toys,
they discover themselves,
because their mothers are cocked guns,
plastic trucks, robots, and soldiers
who once similarly hoped to find love
from the dolls with fluttering eyelashes.

Kristjan Haljak

maidens shipwrecks final judgement days
have been no strangers the last thirty years
I was one of those jacks of all trades too
part alcoholic part cobbler

and the absolute best among radiators
my daily booze was the future
sugarcane plantations poverty filth favorite
guest of trans-atlantic milking machines

we'll see who gets the last laugh your words
so long as the feast of destruction lasts
destruction loves me like a brother

many times conquerors have taken me as a brother
many times conquerors have trampled my memories' chests
butterfly water a form between man and light

Peace lives in the Estonian language

An interview with the translator Anna Michalczuk-Podlecki

by *Anti Saar*

Anna Michalczuk-Podlecki is a devoted translator of Estonian literature into her native Polish. Among other authors, she has translated works by Andrus Kivirähk, Piret Raud, Anti Saar, and Reeli Reinaus. And even during the course of this interview, her translating work continues. Anna holds a vast wealth of warm words for the Estonian language, people, and landscapes.

Being a language with so few speakers, I have to ask: how did you come across Estonian? Did your interest grow out of chance encounters, or did you know that this was what you wanted to do from early on?

I came across Estonian... through song, a bike, and a train! I attended the University of Wrocław and ended up joining a choir, which was very unique and collaborated with a theater from Węgajty. The theater had invited some Estonians to sing as well. The very first I met were members of the Linnamuusikud ensemble. It was also the first time I ever heard the Estonian language. We performed in Poland, Corsica, and Sardinia.

The first time I came to Estonia was on a long-distance bike trip with friends. I can still remember my excitement: that's the place where the people speak *Estonian*! I just fell in love with the language. It seemed so beautiful; it was mysterious and

contained a kind of peace. There's a kind of peace in Estonia in general – in its landscapes, its language, its people. Something that I lacked, and which I discovered there. I've visited many different countries, but it's only in Estonia where I've sensed that gentle, invisible peace.

The third connection I mentioned was a train: the train I took with my choir to south-east Poland. Also on board was a group of Estonian geography students on their way to Ukraine, and we got to know one another during the ride. I felt like Estonia was ubiquitous in my life – I simply accepted it, like jumping into a lake.

How difficult or easy was it to learn Estonian? What encouragement and what warnings would you give to those who would like to get to know the language better?

I had an insatiable appetite for languages at university. It's given me some basis for



ANNA MICHALCZUK-PODLECKI · ARCHIVE PHOTO

comparison: Estonian is much harder than English, but much easier than Lithuanian (i.e. the conjugation and all the phonetic changes that happen all at once) and even German, which is much more rigid. Estonian feels enchanting to me, but also clear and logical. Of course it does pose its own challenges, like its consonant gradation and whether to use the genitive or the partitive case.

I'd encourage others by saying that the deeper you go into Estonian, the more fascinating it becomes, and often, a single word can contain an entire story, poem, or bit of wisdom. Take for instance the word *juurdlema* (investigate), which already contains the answer to how to solve a problem (*juur*

– root); a whole school of psychology. Or incredibly beautiful and descriptive words like *mesipuu* (beehive, lit. 'honey tree'), *kaelkirjak* (giraffe, lit. 'neck + spotted cow'), *õeraas* (lit. 'speck of sister'), *kangekaelne* (stubborn, lit. 'stiff-necked'), *surmkindel* (lit. 'dead certain'), *naeruväärne* (laughable, lit. 'worthy of laughter'), *vastutulelik* (accommodating, lit. 'inclined to approach'), *eksitee* (deviation, lit. 'path that leads you astray'), *mahajäetu* (abandoned, lit. 'left behind'), *lootusriikas* (hopeful, lit. 'rich in hope'), *lollpea* (idiot, lit. 'stupid-head'), etc. Sometimes it feels like the whole language is like that. Like the language itself is a story.

The warning I'd give is to say: keep your mind wide open when you learn. It's a

different system, a different way of thinking, and it took me a long time to understand how to talk about the future or the duration of an activity in Estonian.¹

Describe your first independent translation, if you would. What was most difficult at first?

My first attempts were published in Wrocław magazines – stories by Mehis Heinsaar and Kristiina Ehin. The first longer work I translated was a giant leap into the unknown: Jaan Kaplinski's collection of essays titled *Isale* (To My Father). It was highly moving, even for Polish readers. That one took a long time as I was simultaneously working full-time at a big Wrocław concert hall. Things later got better because, thanks to my husband and my young son, I had a chance to work from home. And that's when the tree began to blossom: I began working on children's books by Piret Raud, Anti Saar, Andrus Kivirähk, Hilli Rand, Helena Läks, and Reeli Reinaus. Right now, I'm translating Kivirähk's novel *The Man Who Spoke Snakish*, after which will come Anti Saar's *Pärt* series, and then Kivirähk again – *Tilda ja tolmuingel* (Tilda and the Dust Angel) and *Rehepapp ehk November* (November). I'm also planning to translate Priit Põhjala's *Onu Mati, loomaarst* (Uncle Mati, Veterinarian) and Reeli Reinaus's *Maarius, maagia ja libahunt* (Maarius, Magic, and the Werewolf). And I hope many, many more titles to come!

It's hard to keep track of Estonia's literary scene and its book market from a distance, though this is where the Käsnu translators' seminar is an incredible aid – it's an

opportunity to breathe in the air of Estonian literature once again. The Estonian Children's Literature Center and Traducta translation grant program have also been amazing support for me personally.

What is the hardest part about translating Estonian into Polish? Syntax? Idioms? Broader cultural disparities? Or is it something else?

The hardest parts, in my opinion, are the very dissimilar systems of verbs and grammatical tenses. In Polish, as in Slavic languages in general, the grammatical aspect is very important and can be used not only in the past, but also in the future. I'm reminded of an interview with a German who learned Polish and was absolutely blown away by how Polish speakers know confidently that something will be accomplished in the future. It's difficult for me to write that sentence in Estonian already, because the language is so different.

We also have the concept of repetition – perfective and imperfective. For example, if I'm simply present someplace (at the cinema, for example), then I'll use the verb *być* (*jestem w kinie*). But if I'm at the cinema repeatedly (or rarely, or often), then it's the verb *bywać* (*bywam w kinie*). Interesting, right? This turned out to be a huge challenge in Hilli Rand's short and otherwise crystal-clear children's book *Lumivalge ja süsimust* (Snow White and Coal Black). The characters are cats observing a street where something is always going on. As I translated it into Polish, I had to be on my toes to interpret and decide whether the given event repeated every day or had only happened in that moment. I remember it was like juggling Polish verbs; it was hilarious.

¹ *Estonian has no future tense.* - Translator

Another challenge is gender, which is very visible in Polish (male, female, and neutral), and not only in nouns, but in verbs and pronouns as well. I always have to decide whether the universal gender-neutral Estonian *tema* is that or he or she. In Kivirähk's novel *The Man Who Spoke Snakish*, the protagonist Leemet has a snake-friend named Ints. At first, Leemet believes that Ints is male, though it turns out to be the opposite... And I, translating it into a Slavic language, had to come up with a clever solution. Another character is a huge fish named Ahteneumion. So, I had to write to Andrus and ask: hey – would you rather Ahteneumion be a male or a female fish in Polish? The name itself almost sounds male, but the Polish word for fish is feminine (*ryba*). That gave us a lot of laughs... Then, there are the lexical challenges: how do you translate *hiis* (a sacred grove or stone) or *rehepapp* (an historical figure who heated the barn kiln and oversaw threshing at a manor; as well as a self-serving and dishonest person or thing acting as a go-between)? One way to do it is to see how such words have been translated into third languages. Still, problems like these are right in my wheelhouse – they hold the sorcery of Estonian.

How much Estonian literature has been translated into Polish so far? Do you talk to your colleagues or are you a lone wolf?

I'm sorry to admit that far too little has been translated! The first translations to be published were little snippets of Estonian classics in a lexicon of world literature in the 1930s. The translator, an ethnographer named Kazimiera Zawistowicz-Adamska, also published an article about Estonian

folk beliefs and *Kalevipoeg*. Later, he translated Jüri Parijõgi's *Teraspoiss* (Boy of Steel).

After the Second World War and until the 1980s, Estonian literature was translated into Polish from a bridge language like Russian or German: for example, works by Eduard Vilde, Paul Kuusberg, Friedebert Tuglas, A. H. Tammsaare, Oskar Luts, Enn Vetemaa, Mats Traat, Mati Unt, Vladimir Beekman, Aadu Hint, Teet Kallas, and Jaan Kross.

In the 1980s, an Estonian named Aarne Puu, who was also an author and had come to Poland to start a family, took the stage. Thanks to his work, Polish readers can now enjoy Tuglas's novella "*Maailma lõpus*" (At the End of the World), Arvo Valton's short stories, Mati Unt's *Sügisball* (The Autumn Ball), Vaino Vahing's *Sina* (You), poetry by Paul-Eerik Rummo, and, together with Jerzy Litwiniuk, a collection of poems by Betti Alver, Artur Alliksaar, Hando Runnel, and Jaan Kaplinski. Puu also published a selection of Estonian short stories in Polish translation (including writing by Valton, Kallas, Kruusvall, Rein Saluri, Jüri Tuulik, and Vahing), and Litwiniuk translated Tammsaare's *The New Devil of Hellsbottom*.

August Gailit's *Toomas Nipernaadi* was published in Poland in the 1980s, which is an interesting story: the translator, Alicja Maciejewska, actually finished it in the late 1930s (edited by the renowned Polish author Zofia Nałkowska), but then... then, the war came and the manuscript was burned. Luckily, the novel had also appeared serially in a magazine, so it was recovered in full.



More recently published were Dorota Górska's translation of an essay by Peeter Sauter (featured in the collection *Nostalgia*, 2002) and a collection of Kaplinski poems translated by Puu (2014).

As for children's literature, we have some classics including Eno Raud's *Naksitrallid* (Three Jolly Fellows) and Ellen Niit's *Pille-Riini lood* (Pille-Riin's Stories), both translated directly from Estonian in the 1980s.

So, there have only been two "wolves" as of late: Aarne Puu and, since 2015, I. The two of us met at the translators' seminar in Käsmu, where he also gave me my first children's-literature translation assignment: Piret Raud's books. I'm also a member of the Polish Literary Translators' Union – we have a private Facebook group where we talk and work issues out together if anyone needs advice.

Could you describe your work routine in a few words? How much, how long, and how intensively do you translate? How clean is the first translation, and how many times do you go over it again?

If I've got the whole day to myself, then I try to start early in the morning when my eyes and mind are still fresh.

Once my initial draft is complete, I read through it and mark down questions, parts

I'm unsure of, etc. Whenever possible, I talk to the writer themselves. Estonian authors have always been very accommodating, in my experience.

After I've worked out the kinks, I print the manuscript and read it on paper. I try to imagine it's a Polish book, a Polish manuscript, to make sure the style is fluid and the story comes across clearly. Of course, I do always want Estonia and the spirit of the Estonian language to be preserved (i.e. keeping the character and place names as original as possible), but the book still has to be harmonious in its new language.

Only once that stage is complete do I send it to the publisher. Then comes the edit and the copyedit, the book finds its way back to me, and we work on it until both the publisher and I are satisfied. In that sense, every book I translate is like a rather long-term companion.

ANTI SAAR is an author and translator. He primarily translates philosophy and primarily writes for children. Michalczuk has so far translated two of Saar's books: *The Way Things Are with Us* (*Ja, Jonasz i cała reszta*, Widnokraż, 2018) and *Pärt Gets In a Jam* (Widnokraż, forthcoming).

Family as both a dream and a curse

by Johanna Ross

Martin Algus (b. 1973) is known foremost as an actor, dramatist, and screenwriter. He has authored award-winning plays for over a decade and written scripts for popular Estonian films and TV series, including the popular comedy programs *Ühikarotid* (Dorm Rats, 2010–2012), *Ment* (Cop, 2012–2013), and the long-running drama *Padjaklubi* (The Pillow Club, 2014–ongoing) about the lives of four young women. Algus likewise authored the screenplays of the Estonian hit comedy films *Klassikokkutulek 1, 2, and 3* (Class Reunion; 2016, 2018, 2019), which are essentially remakes of the Danish *Klassefesten* (2011, 2014, 2016).

It thereby came as somewhat of a surprise when Algus's novel *Midaagi tõelist* (Something Real) received the Cultural Endowment of Estonia's Award for Prose in 2018. I cannot overly exaggerate my own surprise, as I was also a member of the awards jury that year. Nevertheless, drama and prose tend to be divorced in Estonia, as Oliver Berg recently remarked in his video review of Estonian drama in 2019.¹ That being said, there are a handful of literary writers who collaborate with the theater and manage to stage some of their plays on occasion. Traffic in the opposite direction is very unusual, especially the leap from

writing TV comedies to receiving a 'serious' literary award – in short, it stood out. The author's surname, which means "beginning" in Estonian, naturally prompted journalists to dabble in wordplay with their reporting.

Algus's trajectory does seem logical if one peers closer at his artistic biography. He has always been interested in social issues, and although such topics are handled with greater gravity in his plays, they've even surfaced to a certain degree in his television scripts. Out of his award-winning plays, *Janu* (Thirst, 2007) depicts the life of an alcoholic and his loved ones, *Postmodernsed leibkonnad* (Postmodern Households, 2009) addresses different family formations and their fracturing, *Kontakt* (Contact, 2010) looks at individuals encapsulated in solitude, and *Väävelmagnooliad* (Sulfur Magnolias, 2013) explores the life of a woman who finds herself dealing with

1 O. Berg, "Kitsas tee püünele. Kodumaine näitekirjandus 2019". https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z1Bcn6AcV4g&list=PLE_9_I6jBdE2T4kN9PjirTN_DfJEGyv6e&index=2&t=os (accessed 5 July 2020)

an unexpected and unjust caretaking obligation. The playwright often adds “based on-” or “inspired by true events” on the title page. He has named Sarah Kane and Mark Ravenhill – big names in 1990s British in-her-face theater, whose works he has also translated into Estonian – as two of his greatest inspirations and models.

In his plays, Albus experiments with different styles while maintaining a clear and consistent signature. He loves to use bold, thick strokes when prodding societal pressure points. Whenever detailing a seemingly dead-end situation, he usually directs attention towards the factors that led the characters to that given moment: to their memories, especially those from childhood. Often, a traumatic encounter shimmers in the person’s past – violence or harassment inflicted upon them as a child, or perhaps merely a lack of proper care. This also frequently gives rise to violence committed in the present; there tend to be violent impulses simmering within Albus’s characters, in any case. At the same time, his scenes can contain unexpected twists and resolutions. A violent episode is not an easily achieved culmination, for the most part, but just one step on the path towards it. Albus also brings different storylines together or interweaves them in unpredictable ways, which is perhaps facilitated by his screenwriting background. Family is seemingly one of his favorite topics, which comes as no surprise – the harmonious nuclear family is the stuff of happy fantasies, and is always the first to suffer whenever anything goes wrong.

This also broadly applies to Albus’s novel and play with the shared title *Something Real*. The story came first as a play, simultaneously trying out a new style for him:

monologue (Albus modestly points out that this has, of course, already been practiced widely elsewhere in the world, such as by the playwright Conor McPherson). When *Something Real* became lost in the shuffle on several theater directors’ desks, it seemed only natural to start rewriting it into a novel. In the end, though, both projects picked up momentum – Albus’s book release and stage premiere took place on the same day.

The play and the book are essentially identical, their main differences lying in the density of Albus’s writing on the phrase and sentence level, in accordance with their given genres. Two contrasting characters are juxtaposed, both middle-aged men with a ten-year difference: Leo works at an architectural bureau and lives with his wife in a terraced house in the suburbs; Carl has just gotten out of prison and moves in with an alcoholic woman named Leila. Leo analyzes and compulsively justifies his behaviors – he is articulate, constantly coming up with new arguments and counterarguments. The reader frequently has to wonder whether he is honestly debating his choices or simply rationalizing them to himself. Carl, on the other hand, speaks with a hint of local dialect, which in literary code generally points to a character’s lack of sophistication and presumably also their sincerity. He is surprisingly determined and gives the impression that he has everything under control, which later turns out to be false, of course. Despite the dissimilar manners of speech, the author inserts recurring phrases in the characters’ respective monologues, causing them to reflect each other. Both are searching for “something real”: for Leo, this entails breaking out of his truly oppressive middle-class pseudo-existence, while for



Carl, it involves creating a picture-perfect family at long last.

Specifically, the plot of *Something Real* is knit around chatroom-enabled catfishing and blackmail. Longing to escape his suffocating secure lifestyle, Leo dives headfirst into the world of internet porn. Before long, he realizes he is addicted to a silly fantasy world and “something real” slowly manifests as the chance to meet a female internet acquaintance offline. Simultaneously, Carl methodically strives to construct a “real” family out of himself, Leila, and her two

children; to keep them all on a straight path; and to improve their well-being. To do so, he believes he needs to first win their respect – to show them he has a plan. This leads to the inception of his idea to use 11-year-old Marta as bait for online pedophiles, then blackmail them. It is at this point where Leo’s and Carl’s paths cross. Although the former is in no way looking for young girls specifically (at least in his own mind), his attention is immediately caught by “Marta16” – a chatroom user who comes off as incredibly pure, melancholy, and real compared with all the others. And so it begins...



Algus's story is packed with fast-paced developments, including a fair share of action scenes. There is excitement galore, especially for a relatively thin book. Even the common phrases that tie the dual protagonists together have perhaps a more powerful effect on the stage than in writing, where the actors volley their monologues back and forth. That being said, the use of dishonest narrators is a characteristic tool of prose, and with it, Algus manages to keep a question dangling throughout the work: who is normal, and what does normalcy even mean?

The twists and turns that the reader undergoes along with the two characters stem, in fact, more from the constant fluctuation of this assessment than from the doglegs of the plot itself. At first, Leo seems like a typical middle-class man with decadently perverse impulses that have started to raise their ugly heads while marinating in the monotony of “the good life”; Carl, on the other hand, is an honest small-time crook who actually wishes to live a decent life, but has been dealt a less-savory deck. These judgements are thrown into doubt relatively quickly. Leo's behavior is obscene, but there is a human quality to it and, for the most part, he treats others with mild goodwill, holding no anger towards his unfaithful wife or the boss who fires him. Carl, however, is like a dog with a bone in regard to his gossamer dream, which increasingly reveals how blind he is to other perspectives and the tremendous degree to which he manipulates those around him. Nevertheless, these characterizations are not absolute: with Leo, for instance, Algus cleverly demonstrates how even an insightful self-analyst is prone to falling into the same old traps. That which is “real” is tenaciously elusive.

A thriller like *Something Real* truly deserves critics' praise for its twists. No doubt Estonian readers will gradually accustom to it, too.

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

Something Real

by *Martin Algus*

Excerpt translated by Adam Cullen



SOMETHING REAL BY MARTIN ALGUS,
VARRAK 2018

Leo

We had nothing left.

It had been that way for some time already, though everything still seemed fine on the surface and there was no apparent reason to question life as a whole.

But that one spring evening—that was the moment I realized it had all been utterly, irrevocably destroyed.

The snow had melted away, puddles shimmered outside, a fresh breeze rattled in the darkness. On the outskirts of the capital, the relatively new housing estate had settled down for the night. Identical terrace houses loomed amid a saturated field like frozen livestock waiting for twilight to turn everything off. The dull roar of traffic came from the highway, alders and birches clacked in a thicket nearby. Such evenings were not unknown to me; those dark hours that press you inward. Nothing in your surroundings helps to draw attention elsewhere. A damp cubic meter of void glows around the streetlamps, moonlight slices contours into the edges of the expanse, but it's just an illusion, a mirage. And encircling you inside those walls is all that clutter, like a lackluster reflection of your pathetic mental landscape.

We were sitting in the living room. The TV played softly—some nature program about monitor lizards that lay on a

coal-black volcanic beach, licking their chops with draconic tongues. A couple of hikers tried prodding them with sticks to get them to move. I was listening to Schubert's Waltzes through headphones. Someone on TV shouted "Look out!", penetrating the music. My gaze snapped into focus and turned towards Diana for some reason. She was reclining on the couch with her computer in her lap, tapping away in her chatrooms with headphones on as well. I stared at her from the armchair and suddenly felt as if I was truly seeing her for the first time in ages. Abrupt, heightened concentration dissolved the veil of habituation that had formed over the years, and there she was: blondish-white hair; a vacuous, expressionless face; bristly faint eyebrows; a dull gaze; a shapeless mouth parted like a tiny beak, supplying her enormous frame with oxygen. Diana's diet had lately consisted entirely of little cakes drowning in pink frosting and savory pies dripping with fat, and she had gotten severely obese.

True, it was simply a symptom . . . a symbol?

Only later, once I myself was tumbling through the dark maelstrom to follow, did I slowly come to realize that Diana's indiscriminate gluttony was nothing more than a replacement for something that had long since crept out of her life.

But that evening . . .

I heard her wheezing inhales and exhales over the melancholic thudding of piano keys in my ears, and I wondered: "Who is this person? No, seriously, who is she?"

Diana was working at a wholesale logistics center, even though she had a degree in sociology. I dimly remembered having once had the arousing revelation that from a certain angle and with a

particular expression on her face, she was the spitting image of Marilyn Monroe. The comparison now seemed nearly misplaced, though its recollection still reflected some long-forgotten sense of clarity and warmth that we'd probably called "love" during flashes of intimacy. No, it *was* love, naturally—we used to have it all.

I was employed at an architectural bureau at the other end of the city. My department handled mapping.

At home we communicated like cave-men, using only grunts and gestures.

"The kids? Huh?"

"Hm."

"To the store, mhm?"

"Mm-hm, that's, yeah . . ."

"This?"

"There."

"Hmm . . ."

"Ah?"

"Hm-hhm!"

A kind of resigned disillusion had sprung up in place of love, one that at times swelled into something resembling disdain. Yet even that emotion was utterly passionless—monotone white noise to which we'd been accustomed for a very long time.

I've had a thing for art since I was young. I can honestly say that I have a rather refined taste, and beauty has always been a source of comfort—paintings, music, sculptures. And not just superficial beauty—no—but any composition on the whole, even if it's cerebral. Even if it's the subtlest allusion to the possibility of harmony of any type.

This, however, was total deformation.

And to be clear up front, I myself was no better than she was. Not one bit. It felt like even my most minor of merits had simply trickled away over time like water leaking from a barrel. And now, I felt as if the barrel itself was starting to disappear, too. I

was turning invisible, into a gray figure, into the blunt-edged stencil of a middle-aged man with saggy cheeks, brown marble eyes that looked like they'd been borrowed from someone else's head, a balding skull, and a gut that bulged over my waistband. I usually wore an absent, somewhat astonished expression in the photos taken at company parties—jaw hanging slightly open, eyebrows raised. I was trying to smile but ended up giving the impression of someone who had received a terminal diagnosis just moments before.

We had mutated equally over the course of our lives together.

So why were we here together, anyway?
Our kids?

A boy and a girl.

Was it for the kids?

Out of habit?

Numbness?

I occasionally felt myself to blame when resent led to depression, and I suppose I wished—I believe I truly just wished—for someone to think of me as a good person.

That's always motivated me, that pitiful . . .

"You've got to be a good person."

You're paralyzed by fear and unknowing. The anxiety drives you mad. You want to scream, to bellow, to smash everything to bits and dig your fingernails into a wall, but you've got to be a good person.

Diana and I no longer slept together—that had long been off the agenda. But I had stayed loyal. There wasn't another woman and not even the prospect of seeing any change in that department, as I was constantly surrounded by the same type of people—at work, at the grocery store, on the street. Drained looks and mundane topics. No spark, no unexpected sense of recognition that could ignite something dynamic.

I reckon that as things went on that way, I did become more withdrawn and started spending more and more time on the internet.

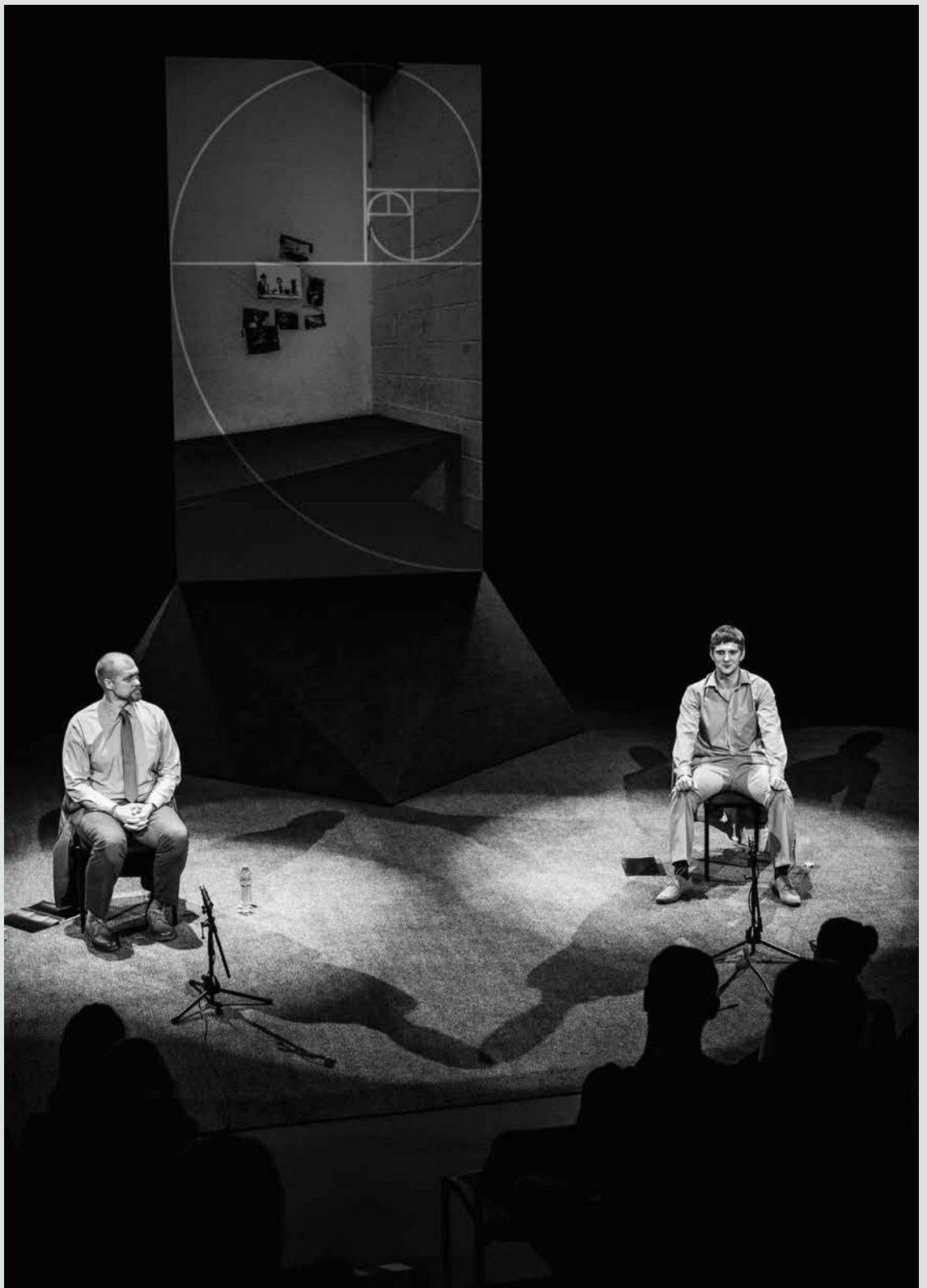
At first . . .

At first, I was looking for beauty; for something to stimulate not only the body, but the soul. I found artistic poses and stylized erotica. Black-and-white visuals, beaded water on the curve of a hip, a fig leaf on a partly concealed breast, you know—relatively harmless, playful fantasy that culminated in an innocent moment of gratification.

But then, rather swiftly . . .

I went further, needing an increasingly concentrated dose; an ever baser, more agonizing, more boundless kind of touch.

And suddenly, that new world revealed itself to me—all those pages, that gasping and sweating, moaning and sucking, utterly free and equally filthy sanctuary devoid of doubts and taboos, unbridled and direct. I'll admit it probably was the polar opposite of refined taste, but that's where I'd ended up. It was a secret club that was always waiting just a couple clicks away.



SOMETHING REAL BY MARTIN ALGUS WAS STAGED IN THEATRE VANEMUINE IN 2018 · PHOTO BY MARIS SAVIK / THEATRE VANEMUINE

Book reviews

Book Reviews by Peeter Helme, Siim Lill, Helena Läks, Jaanika Palm, Maarja Vaino, Kerstin Vestel and Piret Viires



KAIRI LOOK PIIA PRÄÄNIK JA BANDIIDID (PIIA BISCUIT AND THE BANDITS)

Illustrated by Ulla Saar

Tänapäev, 2019. 142 pp.

EAN 9789949856473

Kairi Look has thoroughly proven herself in the field of Estonian children's literature – a genre that is not only populated by many strong authors, but where the bar is kept continuously high by classics and book series.

Piiä Biscuit and the Bandits also continues a popular book series. The first story about the little girl named Piiä, *Piiä Biscuit Moves In*, was published in 2015, and was Look's fourth work at the time. Kids had quite a long wait for the sequel.

Nevertheless, it was worth the suspense. This continuation, which revolves around the Biscuit family, has a clear structure and narrative, but is also limber and enjoyable for readers both young and old. Ulla Saar's fun and neat illustrations are the icing on the cake.

Most captivating for readers are the book's multifaceted, colorful, and pleasantly silly characters whose comical remarks can be interpreted in several ways, as well as the multiple layers of substance for all ages – content which hints that a whole world lies just beyond the storylines, centered primarily in one wooden apartment house on a shady boulevard.

Although Look's work is dotted with political quips, family lies at its core – bonds that span generations, accompanied by an unceasing discovery of the world and its rules. The author does this brilliantly. Her characters' outlooks on life may be idealized, but only from certain perspectives. Observed from other angles, Look offers a realistic vision – one can't claim she ever hides her head in the sand when addressing universal issues, and her characters confront them head-on as well. Take Piia, who sets out to solve a series of unexplained events in her house, or her soft and slightly feckless father, Paul, whom Look uses to portray the difficult position of a sympathetic and actively present man and father in the post-#MeToo world. And who can forget Jack, a neighbor's Canadian boyfriend who embodies Estonians' Western

stereotypes and vice-versa. Look's array of characters forms an enjoyable, kaleidoscopic, thought-provoking whole that offers thrilling twists, heartfelt emotions, and warm smiles. We can only hope that it will be fewer than four years before readers get their hands on the next Piia Biscuit book. **JP**

MAIT VAIK

KURVAKE SÜGIS (SAD LITTLE AUTUMN)

Puiestee, 2018. 302 pp.

ISBN 9789949728220

Sad Little Autumn, by Mait Vaik, who is best known in Estonia as a musician, the author of countless songs, and whose earlier written work includes outstanding short prose, is a curious novel. It is, on the one hand, precise – the author's ability to describe various states of intoxication and the hangovers that follow is noteworthy and certainly the product of first-hand experience – but on the other hand, it is seemingly apathetic and full of emptiness.

The latter is, however, not meant as criticism. Specifically, Vaik sets out to convey acutely distressing emotions, such as



despair, hopelessness, ineluctability, and resignation. His characters, two fathers and two sons, two middle-aged and two younger, all find themselves in unenviable situations. One father is diagnosed with cancer; the other has been wading through the mires of alcoholism for years, and finally reaches a point where he has given up looking for a way out. One son is a “functioning addict”; the other has been thrust into a violent obsession by an ill-fated romance.

Thus, we are presented with a quagmire; one that is equally mental and physical. Its backdrop is both the solace of Tallinn’s Soviet-era apartment blocks (so familiar from, and similar to, Mati Unt’s classic *The Autumn Ball*) and the withdrawn carelessness of seemingly cozier new housing estates. Vaik sketches these environments in a seemingly casual, but still authentic and enjoyable way, just like he does with the weather – a predominantly gray Estonian autumn where daylight is in steady decline.

As I remarked before, the novel is full of emptiness. Nothing much happens. The men go about their depressing lives, their minds crowded with defeat. Whenever they do communicate – with women, for example – their attitudes are by and large irritable, almost or entirely unwilling to let those conversations reach what would likely be a stillborn conclusion. Another problem is the monotony of the characters’ voices. Vaik’s cacophony of narrators is likely intentional, though it requires the reader to stay on their toes to keep track of what head the author has jumped into and whose story is being told.

But the outcome? What should that be? And here lies *Sad Little Autumn*’s greatest

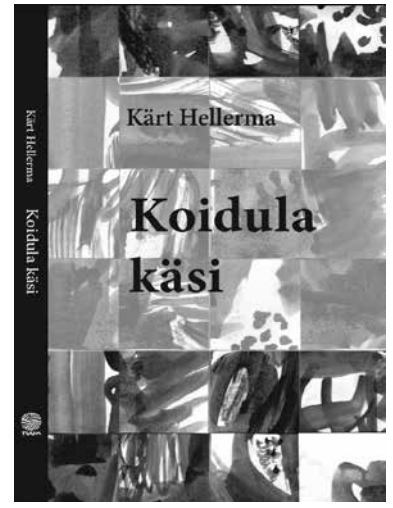
weakness. An author should love their characters, but Vaik takes the path of least resistance – instead of embracing the encroaching disaster, the author snaps his fingers and their troubles disappear in a flash. Or at least become milder. You need happiness in life, as the author declares at the end. Still he glides past problems too easily and serves his characters their fortunes on a silver tray. It appears as if the author himself grew tired of the despair he was detailing and decided to wipe it all away. Nevertheless, an author is at the liberty to do just that. He is the alpha and omega, and his characters are seemingly insignificant; unremarkable. At the same time their sufferings, with which one has that much greater of an opportunity to relate to, do make the stomach churn. Perhaps they really have earned their unexpected redemption in this life. **PH**

KÄRT HELLERMA

KOIDULA KÄSI
(*KOIDULA’S HAND*)

Tuum, 2020. 216 pp.
ISBN 9789949743308

Kärt Hellerma’s collection *Koidula’s Hand* contains ten dissimilar short stories, the characters of which appear to be regular people simply getting by in life. Even so, something about them is off: a failure to adapt or come to terms with their immediate environment, common lasting values or relationship patterns; an off-putting aura or a habit of rejecting fears and obsessions. The atmosphere in each story is somewhat gusty and overcast, just like a considerable portion of springtime at Estonia’s latitude.



The individual alienating quality Hellerma's characters possess often leads them to fall victim to malice or carelessness. At the same time, they are unexpectedly tenacious in keeping their calm as they encounter bizarre beings and phenomena that go beyond the ordinary – something we encounter frequently in Hellerma's stories, many of which extend nearly into the realm of sci-fi. In spite of her writing's mystical substance, Hellerma isn't very fond of symbols or cloaked meanings, which comes as somewhat of a shame in some of the stories – readers might wish to be led around more delicately at times.

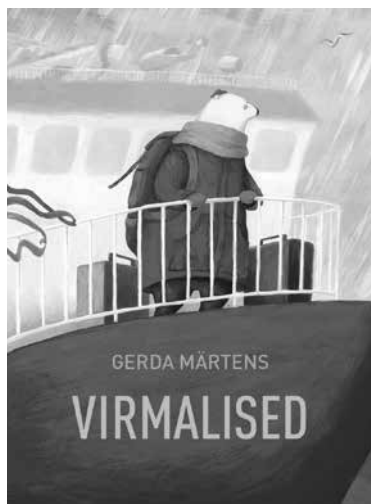
Several of Hellerma's protagonists are united by a fear of death, and one recurrent theme is the processing of shame. As the collection's semi-eponymous character states: "I don't want shame. Shame is terrible, probably the very worst." Her story "The Glass House", in which a phone call from the narrator's friend reveals details of a past trip from newly re-independent Estonia to Sweden, expounds upon a similar feeling: "In the photos my husband took, I was wearing these awful Soviet-era boots, black and semi-tattered. Since Swedes don't

take off their shoes when paying someone a visit, he made me keep them on inside. All around me were fine things designed with an artist's touch, like furniture taken right out of a petite bourgeoisie lifestyle catalogue: soft-toned chairs and sofas, pink light fixtures, artificial flowers ... And my filthy, appalling, broken-down footwear in stark contrast ... My calling card; my true self." In this, the author captures Eastern European shame in its most genuine and painful form. It is in the rendering of these images that Hellerma's greatest strength indeed lies. **HL**

GERDA MÄRTENS
VIRMALISED
(THE NORTHERN LIGHTS)

Koolibri, 2020. 40 pp
ISBN 9789985043738

Gerda Märtens, one of the most unique and fascinating illustrators in Estonian children's literature today, recently decided to write her first original manuscript to accompany her art: *The Northern Lights* is her solo debut.



The book's protagonist is a polar bear and photographer named Jon, who lives in the Arctic. In the morning, he wakes up early to capture the sunrise, after which he heads to the town square to take pictures of the tourists who come to revel in the polar beauty. But then, driving rains start to fall on Jon's homeland, melting the snow away. When the floodwaters are lapping at his front door, the polar bear has no choice but to leave his homeland. The bears abroad are very kind to Jon, but there is still much to get accustomed to, such as the brown bears' sauna rituals or their fascination with fortune telling.

Environmental protection serves as Märtens's main inspiration for the story. *The Northern Lights* encompasses a broad range of issues and involves a complex tangle of problems that usually isn't easy to unravel and explain to children. Nevertheless, the author accomplishes this brilliantly, scaling global problems down to an individual dimension that young readers can comprehend. The story resounds with the notion that the problems going on aren't somewhere far away – their effects will be felt by everyone here on Mother Earth. When the gorgeous, scorching summer

never seems to end, it turns out not only the Arctic is in trouble, but the brown bears' homes as well. Before long, everyone inhabiting the opposite end of the globe will come to know drought, and the famine it can bring.

One major issue wound into the environmental theme is migration. Even when addressing this hot-button topic, Märtens endeavors to seek compromise and reconciliation. She emphasizes how important it is to journey with an open heart and mind, and to learn from your path – not become stuck in old patterns.

The Northern Lights is in no way a moralist work. At its surface is a story about someone seeking safety and the warmth of a hearth when his own home is taken away. Märtens places herself in the same boat as the reader and joins in the search for a solution. The book does not arrive at a clear answer to the complex situation or of how to resolve our global crisis. That being said, the author doesn't wish to leave children stranded, either. Jon the polar bear is helped by a little tin box his grandfather gave him, along with a warning to use it only in seemingly futile situations. Jon scatters the seeds it contains

across the ground and before long, he finds himself staring out over a sea of fluffy white blossoms – just like an Arctic snowscape. It is up to each and every one of us to determine what to do if we lack a tin from grandfather. **JP**

ANDRUS KIVIRÄHK
SININE SARVEDEGA LOOM
(*THE HORNED BLUE BEAST*)

EKSA, 2019. 296 pp.
EAN 9789949684045

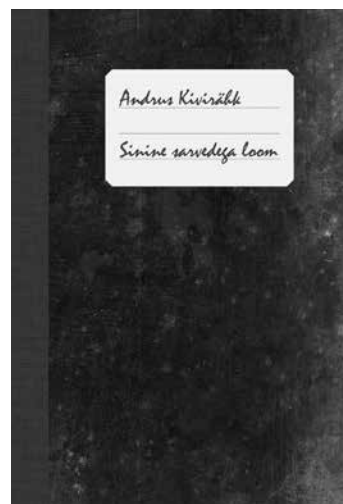
The Horned Blue Beast (2019) is the fifth novel by Andrus Kivirähk – a satirist, incredibly prolific author of short stories and plays, and one of Estonia’s most popular children’s writers. Kivirähk’s prose, which frequently draws upon Estonian mythology, is his most serious creative undertaking, carefully conveying well-considered messages and is quite profound in nature compared with his other, colorful and sometimes frivolous writing.

The protagonist of *The Horned Blue Beast* is the artist Oskar Kallis (1892–1917). According to the author, he carried the idea for the book around with him for five years: “I thought about what to do with that Oskar

Kallis of ours. The writing itself took only six months or so, I reckon.”

Kallis was one of the first to ever receive artistic training in Estonia. His life, ended prematurely by tuberculosis at the age of 25, was tragic on the whole. Even so, the young artist managed to secure himself a place in art history with some of his best works: illustrations of the Estonian national epic *Kalevipoeg*. Kivirähk’s novel is likewise built upon fantasies that spring from Kallis’s paintings. The artist’s dual realities of life and art blend into a single fantastic world of characteristically Kivirähk quirkiness, which forms the backbone of the book. Thus, figures in Kallis’s paintings – such as Death – transform into significant, animate characters. The artist discovers a literary door leading into the world of folklore, which he begins to visit to paint his subjects in the flesh. In *The Horned Blue Beast*, Kivirähk masterfully exercises his talent for fantasy as he depicts the artist’s inspiration.

The novel is written in diary format as Kallis lies on his deathbed. Although it is light and youthfully capricious in style, Kivirähk uses his main character to debate national art, mythology, and the mission of the artist. Kallis is, in fact, only one of many deceased



cultural figures the author has called up in his works, two other outstanding examples of which are the dancer Erika Tetzky in *Liblikas* (Butterfly, 1999) and the beginning playwright Adolf Rühka in *Adolf Rühka lühikene elu* (Adolf Rühka's Short Life, 2005).

The Horned Blue Beast is not tragic in tone and dying at a young age is nothing terrible for Kivirähk's character – the author himself has even remarked that it has a happy ending. Kallis, who falls in love with Death in the form of a young woman, is ultimately united with his beloved for good. MV

TÕNIS VILU
TUNDEKASVATUS
(EMOTIONAL UPBRINGING)

Häämaa, 2020. 93 pp.
ISBN 9789949016594

Emotional Upbringing: Japanese Death Poems is Tõnis Vilu's seventh poetry collection. On his blog, the author has written that it is a very personal, frank, and political

work, but is above all human.¹ Although politics is a pervading theme, the author also asks the question: how can one be a good person?

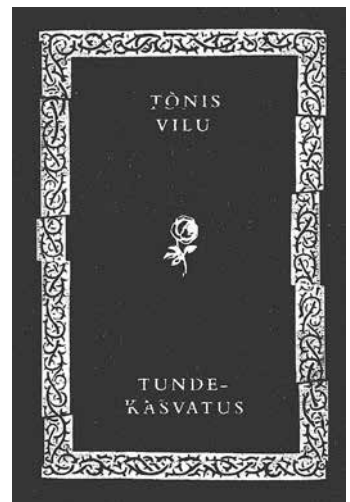
This handling of political topics is something new for Vilu. He is disappointed in the turn of events and criticizes Estonian right-wing politicians, writing bluntly:

“the Helmes are dicks, Kuusik's a dick, Põlluaas / is a dick, Kaalep's a dick, Reitemann's a dick, / Järvik's a dick, they're all dicks”. (p. 45)

Vilu is similarly disappointed in the media – reading the news (especially the Estonian daily *Postimees*) makes the lyrical narrator's blood boil. Yet, outweighing political issues is the quest for righteousness:

“If I one day realize truly, *for real*, that /up till now I've gotten by only and *just* / (no more!) in order to get by / till now, / will I finally be a good person then?” (p. 44)

¹ Tõnis Vilu's blog: <http://ilmavilus.blogspot.com/2020/02/tundekasvatus.html>



Poems about Japan are indicated by a forward slash. They are thematically similar to the rest of the work, with the lyrical narrator readily revealing his thoughts and emotions. As the book's subtitle hints, depressive moods dominate the writing. There are three things in life which are totally free, and for which there's no point in seeking reasons: breakups, emigration, and suicide (p. 91). Repeatedly, the narrator expresses the notion that things would be better if he didn't exist:

"How can I put it, the sense that I've / said it all the time, but it's (as true as true can be): / I want to die." (p. 70)

Vilu has similarly discussed suicide and mental health in his earlier collections (especially in *Kink psühholoogile* (A Gift for a Psychologist)). The narrator is hopeless, afraid that nothing will ever help; afraid of what his children think of their father – who is prepared to jump at any second.

Balancing out the bleak currents in the poems are the hope and efforts to come to terms with the fact that no one is constantly capable of being a *good* person, or even the best version of themselves.

There is no definite answer to the author's original question, though he writes:

"Sometimes it's simply enough / for you to keep yourself from turning into / the worst version of yourself." (p. 30)

Is that sufficient, though? The Estonian Tonisu-san, living and working in Japan, doesn't want to believe it:

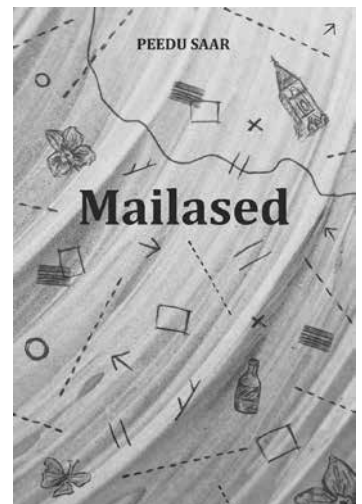
"Is it enough? Miyazaki-sama. / Have I really, truly earned this?" (p. 30)

KV

PEEDU SAAR
MAILASED
(VERONICAS)

Paradiis, 2019. 182 pp.
ISBN 9789949741212

Peedu Saar's *Veronicas* is a dreamily sentimental romance that reads as strikingly old-fashioned in this, the second decade of the 21st century. It is only Saar's second novel, but is thicker and artistically more mature than his debut, *Pascual* (2018).



Although *Veronicas* lies somewhat outside the contemporary mainstream of Estonian literature, the novel still attracted a fair degree of attention, and was nominated for the Cultural Endowment of Estonia's Award for Prose in 2019.

In a quote printed on the back cover, the Estonian author Peeter Sauter compares *Veronicas* to the impressionist and sentimental works of the early 20th century like A. H. Tammsaare's university stories and Oskar Luts's *Kirjad Maariale* (Letters to Maaria). The literary critic Märt Väljataga also observes a similar rebirth of Luts's characteristic sentimentalism in Saar's novel. And not merely 'similarity'. He notes that *Veronicas* shares a connection with Luts by way of its physical setting, its identical outlook on life, and the mysterious and alluring feminine sphinx to whom the story itself is addressed.

Veronicas is set in the Estonian university town of Tartu. Its protagonist has fallen head over heels in love with a girl he affectionally calls "Veronica", after the flower (also known as speedwell or gypsyweed). His deep affection is sparked from a single encounter, one weekend, and yet the dream of it fills the young man's days, entirely. The novel is structured as an appeal to the man's beloved, allowing the reader to accompany him through his raging emotions and waves of anticipation, yearning, and distress.

The book is, in a way, very Tartu-like and accurately conveys the aura of that "city of mists and dreams" (Doris Kareva). Saar's style is unhurried. He takes time to describe developments, pondered thoughts, time spent in pubs, and longings. Although the protagonist has real work to do as a

biologist, that which unfolds in his mind is somehow more tangible – his dreams are realer than reality itself. He is joyful and sorrowful simultaneously; lonely and yet with his beloved in every dream.

Saar's work is very well-rounded, with a clear composition and uniform style. The man's emotions are spontaneous and believable, while his sentimentality does not estrange the reader.

With *Veronicas*, Saar has accomplished a highly convincing, gripping, and stylistically enjoyable story of imagined longing; of a love that, as it turns out, is just a figment of the protagonist's imagination, and thus may have never really existed at all. **PV**

MAARJA KANGRO

TUUL

(WIND)

Nähtamatu Ahv, 2019. 120 pp.
ISBN 9789949013357

Maarja Kangro holds an unshakeable position on the Estonian literary scene. Her poetry, prose, and translations always spark lively debate, garnering admiration and scorn alike. The storm that rose around her autobiographical works *The Glass Child* and *My Awards* hasn't yet blown over, and not without cause. Kangro is strikingly frank and her cultural reach is expansive; one could even call it elite. The storms have been followed by *Wind*, which several Estonian literary critics have called her best collection of poetry yet.

Wind is a blend of autobiographical experiences that collide with broader societal developments and, as always, the



constant polarity-crossing dance of Eros and Thanatos. There is also a temporal dimension: a teenage girl who says in 1991, “I’d rather read sartre kafka dürrenmatt / but it’s like I’ve got to score / life has to be awful / and I can’t even imagine it doesn’t” (p. 15) encounters scummy Estonian bastards in 1998: “the Estonian guys at the other table / have cropped hair / their bear-like brows low of course / equador they scream / equador you should be ashamed / estonian girls can’t find themselves / a real man they / whore themselves out to macaroni” (p. 22), and transitions into a settled social setting in 2015 where there is “a birthday party / in a terraced house / with salmon champignons and pavlova / conversation includes new brake discs / cultural policy” (p. 47).

Like Kangro’s earlier works, *Wind* has been criticized for its excessive intellectualism and unnecessary layers of meaning and references. At the same time, these aspects do not disturb or impede the poems’ interpretation. Rather, it might cause a certain sense of embarrassment to surface when you see someone navigating different languages and cultural dimensions so effortlessly – not

posturing, but simply staying true to the author’s nature. Equivocal references clash with unequivocal ones (*o rose thou art sic*); linguistic finesse encounters a crudeness that is not grating, but rather a natural fit with the work as a whole.

There is also rhyming verse, which the author claims is once again in vogue. And it functions well in Estonian: “why is there no door in the doorway / through which you hear: for me, a Caesar salad / how can we know our avant-garde is valid / the poet leaps her face says make way” (p. 112).

Kangro points out and critiques societal changes: “Old Town reeks of / cheap deep-fry / ochlocracy / the tourists are ripe for something / the *kulturtante* is ripe / the little nazis are ripe / I stare at ripe rotten apples / framed by the night sky / dark fermenting apples / the sea is black” (p. 44). Or: “the tots are running things today! the tots who were afraid their tot-world / would be taken away / are finally getting / their way and choosing the cartoons” (p. 101). I can firmly state that Kangro is one of the keenest social-critical poets of our day and a perceptive observer of life in general,

because it is an art to take all the excrement coursing through the sewers, the bums cast out on their butts, and the orgasms that never came, and then put them into context. Life's trivialities embrace meaningful moments. *Wind's* poems are outspoken, piercing, and precise: men are meat, words are an element of the bloodstream, body and soul are interwoven, and they needn't be set apart. *Wind* deserves repeat-reading and certainly will not lose its bite over time. Thank you, Maarja Kangro! **SL**

PEETER HELME is an author, literary critic, and public radio host.

SIIM LILL is an autonomous expert.

HELENA LÄKS is a poet, editor, and publisher.

JAANIKA PALM is a researcher at the Estonian Children's Literature Center.

MAARJA VAINO Ph.D. is a literary researcher and the director of the Tallinn Literary Center. With a phobia of garlic and onions, she might well also be a vampire.

KERSTIN VESTEL studies literature at the University of Tartu and organizes cultural events in her free time.

PIRET VIRES is a professor of Estonian literature at Tallinn University. Her research focuses on contemporary Estonian literature, postmodernism, post-postmodernism, and the interaction between literature and technology.

Recent translations

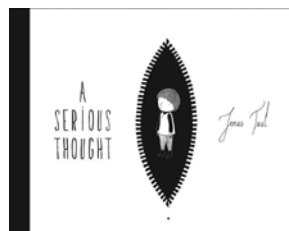
English

JONAS TAUL

Öömõtted

A Serious Thought

Published by Groundwood Books/
House of Anansi Press, 2020



Finnish

MIKA KERÄNEN

Salaperäinen lillenäppäjä

Salaperäinen kukkuvuoro

Translated by Kaisu Lahkinen

Published by Lector Kustannus, 2020



JAAN KROSS

Kivist viulid

Maailman löytäminen

Translated by Jouko Vanhanen

Published by Ilmapress, 2020



JAAN KROSS

Taevakivi

Taivaankivi

Translated by Jouko Vanhanen

Published by Tuglas-seura, 2020



French

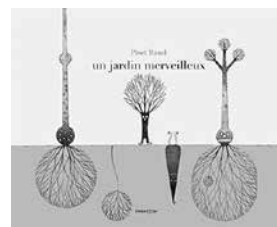
PIRET RAUD

Juurtega aed

Un jardin merveilleux

Translated by Olek Sekki

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German

PIRET RAUD

Kõrv

Das Ohr

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Hungarian

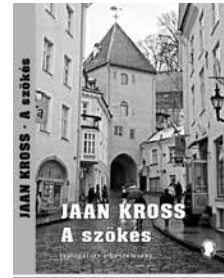
JAAN KROSS

Pögenemine (valitud jutustused)

A szökés (válogatott elbeszélések)

Translated by Béla Jávorszky

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Latvian

MIKA KERÄNEN

Fantoomrattur

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ANDRUS KIVIRÄHK

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Lithuanian

PIRET RAUD

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Melancholija

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Norwegian

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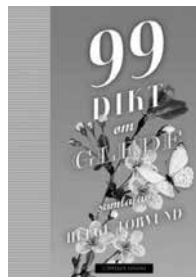
ØYVIND RANGØY, KAUR RIISMAA

99 dikt om glede

Translated by Øyvind Rangøy

Edited by Helge Torvund

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Russian

LENNART MERI

Hõbevalge

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ARMIN KÕOMÄGI

Täius

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MAARJA KANGRO, JAN KAUS, JUKU-KALLE RAID

Ma olen su luuletus. Eesti luulet Jelena Skulskaja tõlkes

Я - твоё стихотворение. Эстонские поэты в переводах

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Slovenian

ANDRUS KIVIRÄHK

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Spanish

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Edited by Jaime Benito Rosa Romero, Triin Soomets

Published by JB Rosa Ediciones, 2020



Swedish

ILMAR TASKA

Pobeda 1946

Mannen i bilen

Translated by Heidi Granqvist

Published by Historiska Media, 2020



Estonian

Literary Magazine

Nº 3

Autumn 1996

Published and distributed by The Estonian Institute and KOGE Publishing House Ltd.

Estonian Prose,
Poetry and Drama
in the 1990s

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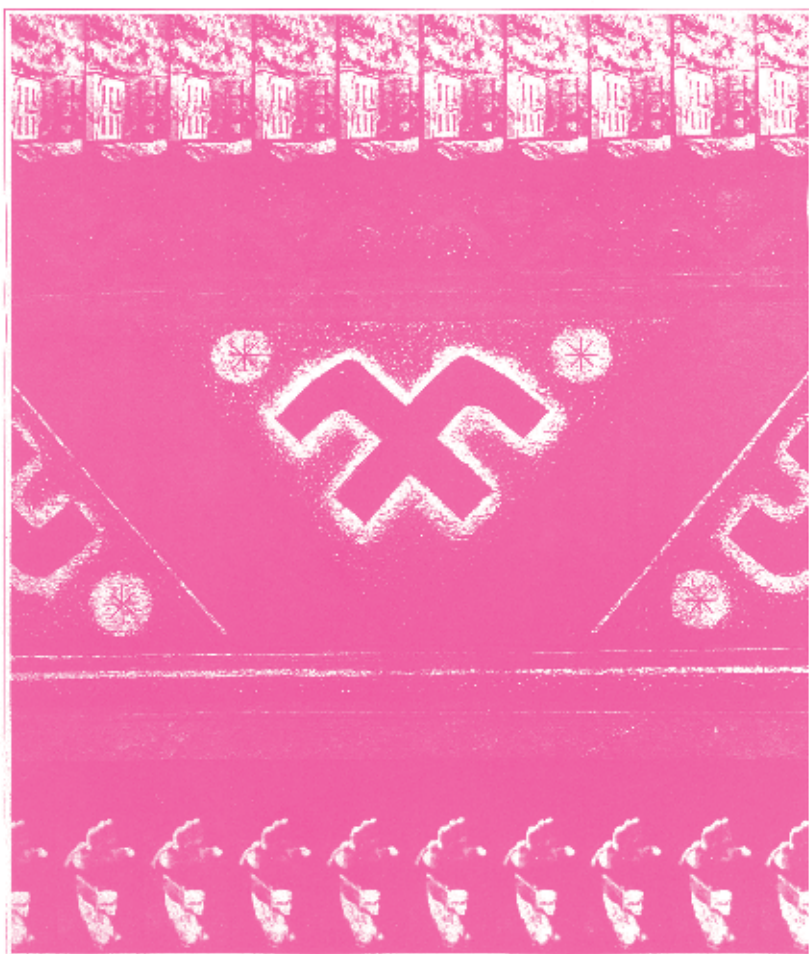
An Interview with
Jüri Talvet

Jaan Tammisaar

Juhan Viiding

Short Outlines of
Books by Estonian
Authors

Estonian
Literature in
Translation
1990-1995



THE'RES NOTHING NEW HERE IN THE WORLD (1886, mezzotint) by Kajo Põllu

KALJO PÕLLU (b. 1884) graduated from the Tallinn Art Institute in 1902, proceeding then to work as the head of the Art Studio at Tartu University. His influence on the Estonian Pop Art in the '60s and '70s cannot be overestimated. Later he dedicated himself to ethnographic symbolism, and won several Kunstjar Auad awards.

The Bard

Like the roar of waves on the foamy river,
plunging from the rocks
down into the dale;
like the thunder of the heavens
rolling awesome under black clouds:
so runs song fair stream of fire.

Like a wellspring of light
stands the honoured bard
amongst his brothers.
The thunder rolls
and the woods fall silent:
the bard raises his voice
pours forth the sap of song
from his lips,
while all around
silent as the sea cliffs
the people stand and listen.

KRISTJAN JAAK PETERSON, 1819

TRANSLATED BY ERIC DICKENS

