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The identity-less community

by Hasso Krull

Identity is a heavy burden. It's believed that one simply cannot do without it, because one will not know who they are or what they are meant to do, and others will not know how to treat them in turn. Therefore, every person must acquire an identity, even if it means buying one from a store—identity can even be stolen. Yet, immediately upon possessing an identity, it becomes a source of distress, because you can no longer be just anyone; you have to be who your identity defines you as and with which you are identified. Identity adheres to you like a tar baby, and just you try to shed it: it only binds more tightly, ready to devour you whole.

Collective identity is even worse: it takes hold of a large group all at once and squeezes the members into a homogenous body, from which detaching is as difficult as climbing out of a mass grave. Others are constantly in the way. They press at you from all directions, lying above and beneath you, and if one does ever manage to heave themselves over the perimeter, they're promptly tossed right back into that old identity. The only chance of escaping this stalemate is to acquire another identity, which is naturally grotesque, because it entails starting the whole process over again. What's more, this new identity may be left incomplete and thus result in anxiety, uncertainty, and even greater distress. It's therefore best to just stay on one's tried and true path, because at least we know where that will lead (a line of reasoning that is the grounds for conservatism).

Benedict Anderson wrote that the need for identity arises from oblivion: "All profound changes in consciousness, by their very nature, bring with them characteristic amnesias. Out of such oblivions, in specific historical circumstances, spring narratives. After experiencing the physiological and emotional changes produced by puberty, it is impossible to 'remember' the consciousness of childhood. How many thousands of days passed between infancy and early adulthood vanish beyond direct recall! How strange it is to need another's help to learn that this naked baby in the yellowed photograph, sprawled happily on rug or cot,

HASSO KRULL . PHOTO BY GABRIELA URM

is you."[1] If one fails to recognize themselves, they develop a sense of unease or alienation that must somehow be overcome: "Out of this estrangement comes a conception of personhood, identity (yes, you and that naked baby are identical) which, because it cannot be 'remembered', must be narrated." The need for identity is grounded in oblivion and estrangement, but the creation of an identity is based in the imagination exercising narrative tools.

As Anderson stresses, such stories must be positioned "in homogeneous, empty time," as a result of which "their frame is historical and their setting sociological." This applies not only to the individual, but to the collective as well. "As with modern persons, so it is with nations. Awareness of being embedded in a secular, serial time, with all its implications of continuity, yet of 'forgetting' the experience of this continuity—a product of the ruptures of the late eighteenth century—engenders the need for a narrative of 'identity.'"[2] One must invent an identity in order to overcome the interruption, such that a new, imagined community takes over for the previous one. The individual and the nation form contemporaneously; one could say that both are the product of another thing's disintegration. A nation composed of individuals becomes inevitable when the old community has dissolved. But what made up the previous body?

In Estonia, the old community is traditionally called a *küla*, i.e. village, which is simultaneously a collective and territorial concept: a *küla* may have a name and a physical location, but if one uses the word in the illative case—*külla*—then it mainly signifies communication with others, i.e. establishing and maintaining social ties (even in a modern-day metropolis, one can also 'go' *külla*, meaning to visit a village or a person). When someone has come to visit, they become a *külaline*, a visitor—a person establishing bonds, who may be familiar or a stranger, coming from one's own community or farther afield. Here, the primary role is played not by the visitor's identity, but by their societal attunement; by their desire to be a guest and behave as one, too. Anyone can become a visitor, but in order to remain one, they must attune themselves to the community; otherwise they are simply a "stranger", or even an enemy. Yet, when a guest *has* attuned themselves to the community, then their identity can grow indistinct as well. The visitor may be nearly unrecognizable if they are able to integrate into the community and demonstrate that they truly respect the "village".

In this, the distinction between one who belongs and a stranger is not as important as that between "home" and "village", the former denoting an intimate inner circle and the latter, society in a broader sense. When one goes to pay someone a visit, i.e. *külla*, they go to a person's home. However, one cannot "visit" their own home; they can only receive "visitors". Thereby, this forms a community that requires constant communication, but not an identity or an identity-based narrative in vacant, homogeneous time. If such a narrative does not exist, then one may ask: What is the mythical basis for this community? Is it simply suspended in the air, like a spider's web hanging from

1 *Anderson, Benedict. Imagined Communities. London and New York: Verso, 2006. p. 204*
2 *Same, p. 205*

delicate anchors? Or does it have some kind of a mythical equivalent?

In Estonian folklore, there once lived a mythical people in the forests, swamps, and caves, whom locals began to call *vanapaganad*, "the old pagans", sometime in the 19th century. They were similar to the villagers, but wilder, more feral, and free. The old pagans could play all kinds of tricks on people and possessed a special power that 'Christians' had lost, but they could also be friendly. They held feasts to which villagers were occasionally invited and might even give gifts if one developed a trusting relationship with any. Ties to the old pagans were like a mythical model of community relations: although they were savage and strange, they were nevertheless still "one of us". The old pagans could be visited and one could be a visitor in an old pagan's home—meaning, it was possible to attune to their domestic circle, even if the idea itself was chilling. One simply had to come to terms with the feeling, because no visitor is ever truly kindred and one always sets out to visit others, even though the hosts themselves are not total strangers.

I presume that the existence of this mythical other makes possible a community which is not grounded in identity-based narrative, but instead coheres as a web of local relationships. In such a community, a person need not overcome oblivion and estrangement from oneself to establish imagined constancy. Instead, one must master the art of tuning so as to communicate with beings who are not quite the same, but nevertheless in close proximity and thus bound tightly to our own existence. Such a myth cannot operate in homogeneous and vacant time. It creates a whole different

HASSO KRULL - PHOTO BY GABRIELA URM

type of time—one that is natural to the beings themselves and varies according to whom they come into contact, and where. Time is then a mythical weave composed of temporal nests that are interconnected and act at their own rhythms. The identity-less community can really only function in such a temporal space. This community is neither freed nor deprived of identity, but simply has no need for its burden. Instead, the community is held together by a local network, by relationships with other people and other beings. Its narratives are now mythical in nature and cannot be identified with completely, though they still provide a mythical counterpart to commonplace activities. Such a community is, in fact, a universe at home: it remains permanently open, but requires perpetual tuning from its members in order to contribute something on its own behalf, even if it doesn't quite recognize itself or others just yet.

HASSO KRULL is the author of a dozen poetry books and eight volumes of essays. He has written extensively about poetry, mythology and various other subjects, including philosophy and politics, and translated poetry and theoretical works from French, English, Finnish, and others. In 2001 he co-founded *Ninniku*, an ezine, which has published poetry translations from more than forty languages.

The Modern-Day Ascetic

by Hasso Krull
Excerpt translated by Adam Cullen

The Modern-Day Ascetic by Hasso Krull. Kaksikhammas, 2020

Beginning

"A beginning has no bypath," to paraphrase Georges Bataille. And yet, every bypath has a beginning. Asceticism is the most indirect way to arrive at that, which is right within reach. I wish to pick up a mug and take a sip of tea, but first, I stand up, pull on my coat, go out, and spend years of my life in another city, in another country, on another continent, all in order to finally come home one night and knock on my own door. "Come in. Your mug of tea is still steaming."

You begin. But where to next? You don't know. All roads are open—how could you have known they would be so open? Now you should set off, but you still hesitate because all roads are open and they're not simply roads, but *all roads*. All those roads would have been closed if you hadn't come to this place. But you did, and now all roads are open. Where to next? You're like a stranger who knows how much of a stranger he is and knocks on the first door. "Come in. Your mug of tea is still steaming."
[…]

Eroticism

This is the key to the modern-day ascetic. "Since a thing cannot be known directly or totally," writes Timothy Morton, "one

can only attune to it, with greater or lesser degrees of intimacy."[1] Eroticism is the art of tuning: this person is before me, another being, human, inhuman, physical, mental, spiritual, comprehendible, and baffling. Then, suddenly, they are behind me. Next to me. Inside of me. In my thoughts. In my body. I feel them. Sense them. I do not understand who they are. But I tune to them just as an instrument is tuned—just as how the Bushmen tuned their kalimbas to the wind, rain, and silence.

Eroticism is ecology, is ecoerotic logic. "Ecological awareness is awareness of unintended consequences," Morton also remarks. This means approaching all beings in an ecoerotic way, with a greater or lesser degree of intimacy. Of approaching the forest ecoerotically. Of approaching moss ecoerotically. Approaching the land. Approaching a cloud. Approaching a city. Approaching and withdrawing again, because an approach requires distancing, being alone, and tuning to one's inner dimension. It is another inside of me. An animal inside of me. A plant inside of me. An ancestor inside of me.

Ecoeroticism spans all organic activities. Even sex is ecoerotic. Taking a thought and passing it on to someone else—there is something enchanting, wild, and intimate to the act; something madly erotic. An endless stream of gifts, my gift and your gift, gift after gift after gift. They never cease, except for in one case: if progress—the thanato-teleological mechanism, whose goal is life's steady destruction and interrupting the chain of gifts—triumphs. Whoever tunes to progress tunes to the symphony of death: this *is* your gulag; this *is* your Hiroshima and your Auschwitz. A mass grave, shackled limbs, shadows of death cast upon a wall—that is the eroticism of progress.

Yet bodies like glistening patterns, like springs, like planets, like a labyrinth of interwoven roots within the ground. Here, there is no regret. The soil is so black and sweet that it begs to be eaten every day, says the worm.

[…]

Exhaustion

There's nothing better than feeling exhausted. Exhausted from the day, exhausted from the night, exhausted from joy, exhausted from sadness, exhausted from work, exhausted from pleasure. Where should I go, where should I rest my head? On the tussock of exhaustion.

Exhaustion is like a downy pillow; like a gift from pagan imps that says: calm down. Why do more work after the day is done, why keep romping after the night? Check your exhaustion compass. It points north to the land of your ancestors. The north contains all the natural resources we will never come to know; the north contains the might of exhaustion.

Maheneda, taheneda, laheneda – to mellow, to dry, to resolve. The words are an incantation that exhaustion teaches one to recite. There's no more "hurry": I'm exhausted now. Are you, too? We are exhausted together. Who else would like to be exhausted with us? Hugs and kisses and exhaustion.

Exhaustion points one to the source. It is the spring believed to treat ocular illness: your sight returns. You're as light-footed as a roe deer. There's nothing you need to take along from here; here is where you always arrive. The labyrinth itself is your guide.

1 *Morton, Timothy. Being Ecological. The MIT Press, 2018. p. 139*

The sound of translation

An interview with Maima Grīnberga

by Veronika Kivisilla

Estonia and its literature are incredibly fortunate to have Latvian translator Maima Grīnberga, whose efforts, in turn, have been widely noticed and recognized. We can't copy-paste her nearly ten-page CV here of course, with the almost 80 translations from Estonian and Finnish, and the many awards she's received for them. Maima's translations have also been featured in dozens of literary journals and online.

Maima has three homelands: Latvia (though it isn't her 'fatherland' per se, as her father was Estonian), followed by Estonia and Finland. Since the latter was the most recent to come into the translator's life, I suppose it's only fair that it was the country where we met to chat during this grim pandemic: her third homeland and my second. I've taken the train from Helsinki to Mikkeli. From there it's only a short drive to Sulkava, where she lives with another, Finnish, translator of Estonian literature. The Savonian landscape is breathtaking and it's been years since I've been able to enjoy such a sunny, pristine, frigid winter. I spend four incredible days with my translator friends, each filled with hikes, walks with their young Russian spaniel Maru, and delectable dishes prepared by the two gourmets. Also on the menu are Runeberg tortes—traditional on this particular day—with no skimping on the almond meal.

Maima, you know we can't help but start with childhood. I don't suspect the translator inside you began revealing herself then, but what are your earliest memories of language in the singular or the plural, and of literature?

I was born in Riga and although my father was Estonian, I never met him. He simply wasn't a part of our life. Nevertheless, my extraordinary mother had enough wisdom and generosity to decide not to deprive me of his language. We had Estonian-language children's books and a subscription to the children's magazine *Täheke*. I would listen to *Pille-Riin's Stories* on vinyl and she'd organize trips to Estonia for me every summer. I went to camps in Karepa and Kilingi-Nõmme, and even holidayed in Puka. I still have an Estonian friend from those days, Mairi, who gave me "lessons".

MAIMA GRÖNBERGA · PHOTO BY JOUKO VANHANEN

I hold an endless debt of gratitude to my mother. She taught geography and mathematics, and spoke Latvian beautifully. Her greatest dream was for me to become a translator. I started reading at the early age of four, though at the time, I was certainly unaware that I was more or less preordained to become immersed into the world of language and literature.

You've shown me the place in Riga where you and your mother lived until you were four. It's incredible!

As my mother was employed at the Young Pioneer Palace, which operated in Riga Castle at that time, it just so happened that we were housed on a boat belonging to the Pioneer's yachting club, docked at Ķīpsala Island on the opposite shore of the River Daugava.

That really was a wonderful day, when you and I wandered around Riga and got a chance to dip our toes in the water.

And then came school… What activities did you do? What can you remember? Did you try your hand at writing, too?

I read a lot, but I can't remember ever having given explicit thought to the idea that someone had translated a book; that the job of "translator" was something that existed. There was school and my first foreign languages besides Estonian – first Russian, obviously, and later German. There were choir and piano lessons, and home economics club (at my mother's request), and even rowing practice, though I quit that because I lacked the potential to "go pro", so to say.

I hadn't much ambition to write, though I did sometimes write myself letters, mostly while sitting in the University of Tartu library café. They were a diary of sorts. Although what those letters contained… Probably just me moaning and groaning about how awful things were, even though they weren't.

So I gather that your mother played a big part in your life?

We were truly close. It's obvious that without her, Estonia might have never figured into my life (at least not to the same extent), and neither would Finland then, either. Things would have been completely different. But there are many other more trivial aspects, too. Knitting, for one. *[Maima is a fantastic knitter and has been working on several simultaneous projects during my stay in Sulkava – V.K.]* My love for music, for another. Music was already "in the family", though, because my grandfather, who died long before I was born, had been a teacher and organist who graduated from the Cimze Seminary. My mother always took me along to concerts.

You originally enrolled in the University of Riga to study the Latvian language. How and why did you end up going to Tartu?

Today, I suppose I could give two reasons. First, I no longer saw any point in continuing to study Latvian at the University of Riga, and second, I'd already dabbled in translating in a few classes and received encouraging feedback from my professor. That being the case, I'd already worked out in my head that I wanted to become a translator and learn another language, so the

conditions were favorable when I ran into the future translator and linguist Matīss Treimanis somewhere, and he had only good things to say about the University of Tartu, where he'd just studied as an exchange student. I'm also grateful to Harald Peep, who was the deacon of the University of Tartu's Department of Linguistics at the time. He had faith in my transfer and didn't stick me with students who were learning Estonian as a foreign language, but grouped me with the "real linguists". During my last year of college, I was hired to register photos at the Estonian Literary Museum, which helped me to make ends meet.

Those were wonderful years at university, with all that those involved.

By 1993, you'd finished the full Estonian language and literature program at the University of Tartu and were carrying Diploma no. 03038 in your pocket. And then you went back, or onward, to Riga?

That's right. I worked as an editor of the cultural pages at several different daily and weekly Latvian newspapers for the next three years. By then, I was already publishing my first translations in the press and diligently digging into Estonian literature. I'd definitely gotten ahold of a copy of Jaan Undusk's *Kuum* (Hot) and the works of Jaan Kross, to name the most significant titles. For several years, I drafted summaries of the Estonian cultural publications *Looming* and *Vikerkaar* for the Latvian literary magazine *Karogs*. My collection of dictionaries needed for translating swelled during that time, too. It was also when I attended two language courses in Kuopio, Finland, and got my first impressions of the world outside the USSR—an astonishment certainly familiar to anyone who grew up behind the Iron Curtain.

One critical moment came in 1996, when Mati Sirkel invited the translators of Estonian literature to attend a seminar in Palmse and I met many of my colleagues, who remain close friends to this day.

And that's when a third homeland, Finland, entered your life along with the city of Helsinki, with which you fell in love. You were still studying and translating then, correct?

I studied Finnish literature at the University of Helsinki from 1997–1999. Translating had really taken off for me by then, too. If you leave out the children's books by Mauri Kunnas, then I was still translating more Estonian at the time. My first full-length translation, Enn Vetemaa's *Risti rahvas* (Men of the Cross), was commissioned by Latvia's largest publisher, Zvaigzne ABC. I also translated Jaan Kross's *The Czar's Madman* by 1999.

So you were already blossoming into the translator who is known and esteemed in Estonia today. I suppose it's time to discuss *how* you translate. I've always found it fascinating to ask my translator friends and acquaintances about their individual methods.

It all starts with reading the work from start to finish. Afterwards, I make a draft translation from which I sometimes leave out complicated sections to return to later. I'm constantly editing my own work throughout the entire process. I reread it several times, lastly out loud, to be sure that the writing

MAIMA GRĪNBERGA · PHOTO BY PIIA RUBER

is natural and compelling. That last step is especially important with children's books, which you usually read aloud to a child. Though the danger with reading audibly is that you sometimes wind up listening to your own voice and are no longer reading it critically… I suppose I'm quite a traditional translator who always proceeds from context and believes that just as how something will be lost in translation, it's also possible to discover a thing or two. A translator is genuinely a co-author in a sense, but they are, above all, a conduit and shouldn't allow themselves to be too liberal.

Morning is my time to work, for the most part—I'm considerably more efficient in the early hours. I use a lot of dictionaries and do research on the internet and from encyclopedias. I've also had the fortune to be able to collaborate with the authors themselves, meaning I can write and ask questions whenever necessary. Occasionally you come across more complex subjects, and then you need the help of specialists to familiarize yourself with the field and its terminology. For instance, I had to delve deep into the art of glassblowing to translate Tommi Kinnunen's *Pintti*, which will be published in Latvia this year.

What have been the most complex problems you've had to solve? Have you been forced to invent new words, for example?

I haven't invented any, but I have formed unusual compound words or borrowed from Latvian dialects. You'll always find words that are impossible to translate, but the concepts and phenomena can mostly be interpreted and comprehended thanks to the geographic, historical, and cultural proximity of Latvia, Estonia, and Finland. "A hot summer's day" means more or less the same thing to a Latvian and a Finn, but I doubt whether we can always grasp what role a hot summer's day plays in Sicilian writing. Occasionally, complications arise from the fact that Latvian, a Baltic language, belongs to a totally different linguistic family than Estonian and Finnish, and includes many basic linguistic dissimilarities, be they grammatical gender, future tense, etc. *[Finno-Ugric languages have neither – trans.]* You and I once talked about how I was sweating blood over Andrus Kivirähk's absolutely genius children's book *Oscar and the Things*, which required solving a multitude of gender-based equations. Some Finnish authors' fondness for sprinkling regional dialects into their writing has given rise to serious conundrums. The richness of Jaan Kross's vocabulary has also led

me to pull excerpts from dictionaries and flip through history books.

Now, we finally get to the authors. The list of your translations, and consequently your level of productivity, are astounding. There are many different names, though some do recur. Who are "your" authors, most of all? Is there anyone or anything you don't wish to or could never bring yourself to translate?

I suppose there are always some authors who, for whatever reason, have felt closer and resonated with me more. They usually lack parallels in Latvian literature, too, so translating them hasn't merely been for personal pleasure, but has meant enriching Latvia's literary body. As for Finnish authors, I'd mention Olli Jalonen, Rosa Liksom, Johanna Sinisalo, Pentti Saarikoski's Swedish period, etc.

In regard to Estonia, I've had the pleasure to both read and translate Jaan Undusk, Jaan Kross, Maarja Kangro, Peeter Sauter, Andrus Kivirähk, Piret Raud, Tiit Aleksejev, Anti Saar, Meelis Friedenthal, and many, many others.

Translations of Estonian literature into Latvian (and not only my own, of course) have frequently been nominated for our annual literary award. Books by Estonian authors have, especially over the last few years, received many reviews, which is an incredibly positive indicator for translated literature. A few have even been adapted for the stage, including numerous dramatizations of Andrus Kivirähk's prose. The latest was a play based on Rein Raud's novel *The Death of the Perfect Sentence*. It was meant to be performed on the main stage of the Latvian National Theater, though unfortunately no one has been able to see it due to the pandemic. I'm sure one day we will… Things like that help me to feel that my work carries much broader meaning.

I've mostly translated prose; plays and poetry to a much lesser extent. I'm extremely selective with the latter and am neither willing nor able to translate poems that are emphatically punny or rigidly formulaic. I'm not thrown off by linguistic registers and am always fascinated to work with slang, insults, and filthy language. I believe a translator must be able to digest anything in terms of topic and content, and I myself certainly have. I don't censor my authors, but I also wouldn't propose translating a work—no matter how masterfully written it may be—that I believe contains gratuitous violence (especially sexual, and especially against children). There's a wealth for Latvian readers to discover in Estonian and Finnish literature. So long as the world doesn't radically change, translating is, and will remain, the perfect job for me. I can't imagine doing anything else. The professional community I interact with is *my* community, in any case!

Your translations have been greatly admired in Estonia and Finland. The many awards you've received speak to it: Latvian and Estonian translation awards, the Cultural Endowment of Estonia's annual literary prize for your translation of Kross's *Professor Martens' Departure*, the Estonian Order of the Cross of Terra Mariana, the Annual Latvian Prize for Literature, the Order of the Lion of Finland, etc.

People often refer to you as "our Maima" in Estonian literary circles. You've been a member of the Estonian Writers' Union since 2009 (but aren't a member of Latvia's, I might add!) As a fellow member, I know for a fact that our foreign translators are incredibly busy. We're extremely proud and grateful! But before we start thanking each other and getting all sentimental, let me ask: Maima, your life has shifted farther and farther from Latvia and Riga; ever northward. You lived in Keila for a while before moving here to Sulkava. Even I sometimes miss visiting you in Riga, the great times we had in your apartment on Tērbatas iela (Tartu Street), and the long strolls on which you showed me the city. Well, I guess we can't avoid getting sentimental. Do you miss Latvia and Riga? What does being away mean to you, especially now, when it's not really possible to travel there at all?

Of course I miss it. Even though I've lived in many different places in Estonia and Finland, even though Tartu and Helsinki are dear to me, Riga is still "my city" more than any other. I miss my Latvian friends; I miss Riga's concerts and cultural scene. I even miss Riga Black Balsam, which you can't buy in Finland and aren't allowed to ship from Latvia. We've run out here, by the way—we had the last little shot when you arrived.

Given that I've practically been speaking only Estonian and Finnish lately, I sometimes fret over what will become of my Latvian from being away all this time. So far, however, there's no direct threat of becoming estranged from my native language.

Despite these strange times we're living in, I'm grateful to have work that I can continue doing and can do here in Sulkava, where there's so much silence and so many open spaces.

(During our conversation, the young Russian spaniel, Maru has padded up to nuzzle us repeatedly. His masters speak to him in Finnish most of the time—he only hears Latvian when he's gotten into mischief.)

Before we take Maru on his afternoon walk through the freezing cold, would you share a joke that Latvians tell about Estonians?

I can't think of one right off the bat. Most of them are about how awfully slow Estonians are! I suppose it goes without saying that both of us, Latvians and Estonians alike, are 90% brake fluid, and we do have six toes.

Maima, thanks for the discussion, and thank you for your generous hospitality! These have been the most beautiful winter days. The inlets of Lake Saimaa, learning about ice-fishing for freshwater cod, the hikes, sauna, unbelievable buckwheat blini, and your last little drop of Riga Balsam. This is a wonderful home nestled in the Finnish woods and brimming with all things Estonian.

VERONIKA KIVISILLA is a storyteller and bard. She is the kind of poetess who believes that today, literature must be brought to the reader and the author must read their words aloud.

MAIMA GRĪNBERGA · PHOTO BY PIIA RUBER

With love for children and respect to parents

An interview with the publisher Alīse Nīgale by Leelo Märjamaa

Alīse Nīgale is a publisher and the director of the leading Latvian children's publishing house, Liels un mazs, where the books by Estonian authors Leelo Tungal, Piret Raud, and Andrus Kivirähk, among others, have found their home. In this indie publishing house, every book is carefully selected and Alīse tells us how she does it.

Liels un mazs started as a small family publishing house for children's books, but you have grown quite a bit as of 2021. You publish Latvian authors as well as translations, you have been recognised internationally, and you have been nominated for the prestigious Bologna Prize for the 'Best Children's Publisher of the Year' for the past three years. What's your story?

I became a children's book publisher at the age of 22. My mother is a well-known Latvian writer, Inese Zandere. She won a manuscript competition in poetry for children in 2000. These were the poems she had written over 20 years. That means, during my entire life at that time. When I read them, I realized that—at the age of 22—I was still very keen on children's literature.

Her book quickly became very popular, receiving every possible literature and book design award. And, of course, they disappeared from bookstores very fast. The publishing house that published the book went bankrupt shortly afterward, but my mom continued to receive frequent questions about her book—will it be published again? One friend even rewrote the whole book by hand to give it to someone as a present!

One day, Inese was tired of questions like: Do you really have no copies left? Are you looking for a new publisher for your book already? So, a brilliant idea came to our minds: we could start to publish children's books ourselves! It was one of those unexpected decisions made in the kitchen between planning holidays, cooking, and discussing politics. Yes, really, why not? We can do it!

ALĪSE NĪGALE · PHOTO BY ELĪNA LIELJUKSE

That is how the publishing house started. We didn't have a business plan, or any startup capital. Our company started as a one-book project and has grown to be one of the leading children's book publishers in Latvia. When we started, we were taking a risk, but we did it with great confidence that our ideas and values would have followers.

How do you choose the books you publish? What makes a good book?

Our focus has always been on publishing contemporary picture books and quality fiction created by the most talented Latvian writers and illustrators. We also publish a list of thoughtfully selected translations. When we publish translations, we look for titles that fulfill that "void" in original Latvian literature. For example, there is a lack in contemporary middle-school level novels or books for young adults, while we have many great poets and illustrators.

The essential key to selecting a book for publication is: do we like the book, does it touch our feelings, is it written/illustrated in high quality, what outstanding values or approach to a topic does it have? If the title meets all or most of these criteria, we pay attention to the prizes it has won or the sale numbers (in the case of translations). In other words, the book has to have the heart factor, and a unique voice.

Our approach also became the slogan of our publishing house: "with love for children and respect to parents", which has touched

many parents personally. The books we publish are, for many families, the way they spend time together with their children. Books are a bridge for talking with children about serious and complex topics. To that point, even adults without children read our books.

You have published quite a few Estonian children's authors: Leelo Tungal, Andrus Kivirähk, Piret Raud, Kätlin Kaldmaa, Anti Saar. Why Estonian authors?

When choosing a title to translate, we focus on other European languages, paying extra attention to neighboring countries and other so-called smaller languages. Estonia has many great contemporary children writers. And, luckily for both of us, we have many great translators from Estonian to Latvian. I guess this is why Estonian authors are beloved by Liels un Mazs.

How do Latvian readers receive the books by Estonian authors? Are they popular if you keep adding new titles to your list?

Many Estonian contemporary children's writers have their unique voices (Andrus Kivirähk to highlight someone at the top of the list). Their writing style is witty, yet profound. And yes, they have become popular among Latvian readers. Liels un Mazs has its fans and followers, those people who wait for each new title from the authors we previously published.

Besides that, we share a common background, the same historical and geographical issues. It is easier for Latvian readers to understand what Kätlin Kaldmaa is writing about in her book *Halb tüdruk on jumala hea olla* than for readers in Germany or the UK. Another thing that makes Estonian writers popular are the translators. Maima Grīnberga or Guntars Godiņš works are a quality mark for the title they have translated. They are well-known and beloved among the audience. If you go to a bookstore and see that Maima or Guntars has translated the book, you know it should be good!

When you publish books by Estonian authors, you sometimes use the original illustrations; for example, the artwork by Piret Raud, Ulla Saar or Anne Pikkov, but sometimes you prefer Latvian artists illustrating the book. For example, Andrus Kivirähk's *Karnevāls un kartupelu salāti* (Carnival and Potato Salad) is illustrated by Edmunds Jansons, and Anti Saar's *Perts sprukās* (Stand here, Pärt!) by Reinis Pētersons. Why is this?

Usually, we choose Estonian titles for publishing from the suggestions of our translators. In these cases, the text and its qualities play the primary role. When we value the illustrations, we do it in the context of the illustrations in Latvia. Sometimes we feel that the illustrations do not look fresh or original in the context of our illustration field. In that case, we invite Latvian artists and designers to make new illustrations for our editions.

Latvian children's authors have also been published in Estonia, but not very many. Why do you think that is?

I would guess it is a lack of publishers interested in neighboring languages and

translators from Latvian to Estonian. Publishers have to be brave and select titles that are not guaranteed bestsellers by well-known authors, but have other essential values. Thankfully, this is already slowly changing thanks to publishers like Päike ja Pilv, and the poet and translator Contra.

Who are the Latvian children's authors who should be translated into Estonian, in your opinion?

Latvia has a strong tradition of children's poetry. I would strongly suggest translating and publishing poetry by Inese Zandere, Juris Kronbergs, Kārlis Vērdiņš, Ērika Bērziņa, and others. These are poets from different generations, but their poetry is contemporary and loved by readers in Latvia. We also have a talented generation of young illustrators. Reinis Pētersons, Anete Melece, Elīna Brasliņa, Anna Vaivare, Rūta Briede, Rebeka Lukošus, Lote Vilma Vītiņa, Mārtiņš Zutis... I could continue this list forever.

I would especially like to mention the comic book *Runājošie suņi* (The Talking Dogs). This is a summer-adventure story about Jacob, a city boy, his cousin, the smarty-pants Mimmi, and a talking stray dog gang, saving a Riga neighborhood. The comic is based on the animated feature film 'Jacob, Mimmi, and the Talking Dogs'. The comic is drawn by Elīna Brasliņa, who is also the artist of the animated movie. For the comics, she developed a new style. She completely redrew the story, keeping the drawings' warm color palette and showing some contrasts between the old-fashioned neighborhood of wooden houses and the modern, but cold, city-center district. The movie and comic protagonists might even already be familiar to Estonian readers, because it is based on the book *Maskačkas stāsts* by Luīze Pastore. This book was published in Estonian by Helios under the title *Jakobi väga hästi õnnestunud plaan* in 2019.

How has the Covid pandemic affected publishing? How has it changed and will change in the future—for you and globally?

Liels un Mazs has had a good year despite the Covid situation worldwide. We published a record number of new titles in 2020. Also, we sold translation rights to several titles since the pandemic started. We cannot complain. International book fairs went online, and we adapted to that quite quickly. I had experience being a fellow at the Frankfurt book fair fellowship program online. If I had to choose, I prefer in-person book fairs, readings, and other events, but the publishing field can work online and can still reach goals this way.

What I can see globally, is that people are getting back to reading. I guess we are all too tired of screens of all kinds. So, I see hope for publishing even in these circumstances. That said, however, publishers have to be creative and find new ways to promote their books and reach audiences. I also see immense potential in audiobooks for both children and adult audiences.

LEELO MÄRJAMAA is a translator, publisher in Draakon & Kuu publishing house, and the president of IBBY Estonia.

A faith that can be worded

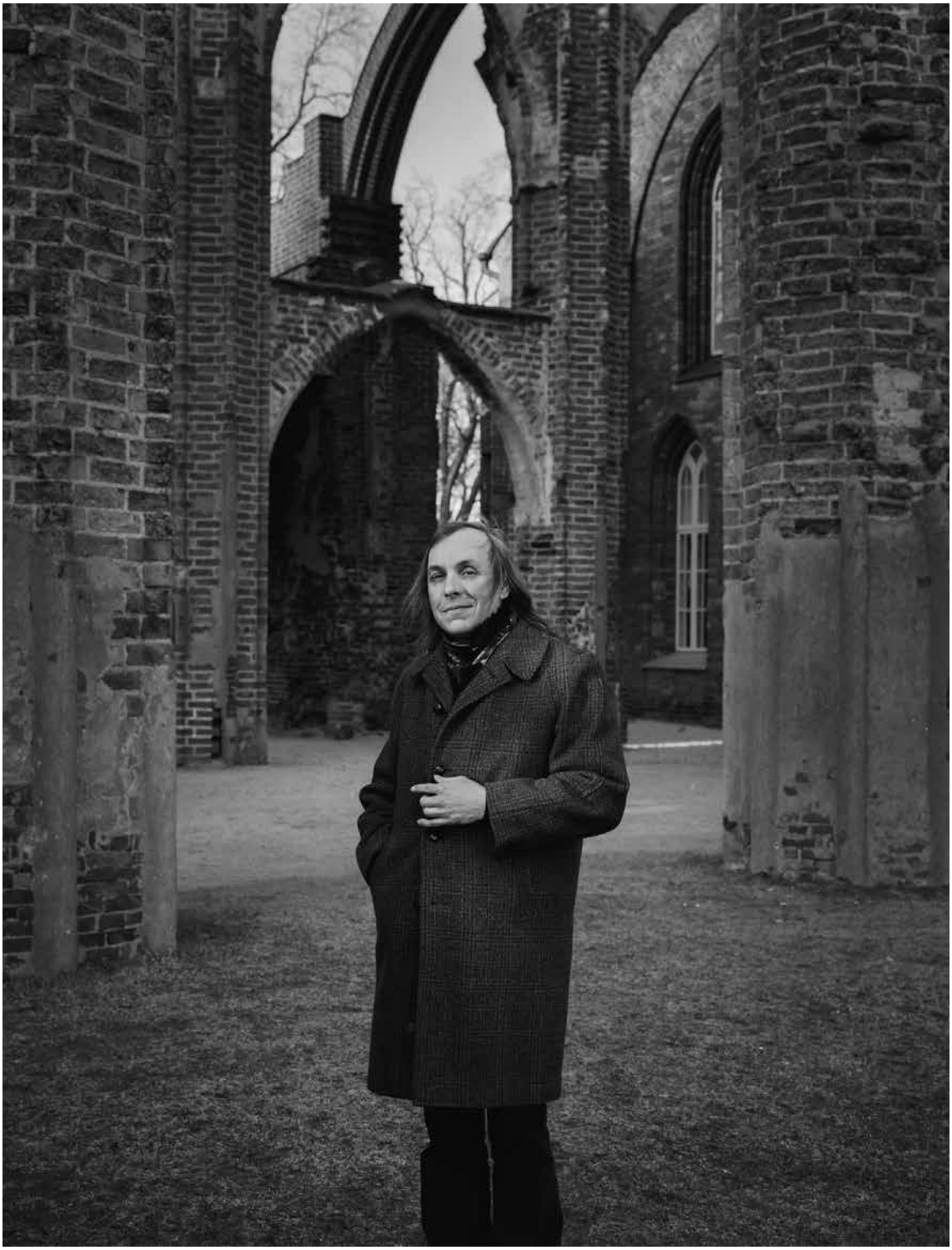
An interview with Lauri Sommer

by Triin Paja

Lauri Sommer's writing and music possess a timelessness, prayer, and sanctification. He sings to humans and to birds, strolls with a light pilgrim's step past the gripping current of what is vogue, and sits beside a winding, trickling stream to craft his singular style and world. His solitary wanderings are complemented by meaningful encounters with fellow hermits, owls, cats, words, and silence—opportunities for him to interpret and weave life into words.

Lauri, in the wake of this strange year, I'll ask you something Andrei Tarkovsky asks in your recently-published short-story collection *Lõputu soovid* (Endless Wishes): "What held you up when everything was unbearable?"

Strife, sickness, and breakdown seem to be happening both on a societal level and in people's own lives. Economic crisis is depriving many people of their jobs, and crushing dreams. Hardships, infection, aimlessness, and impasses. At critical points such as this, art, literature, and music can acquire special meaning and be more than mere entertainment or a learned game. They can be intimate, healing, and elucidating. For many years, I've been living as an internal exile here at my farmstead in South Estonia, occasionally leaving to visit my daughter and a few friends. So, I'm used to hermeticism. Friends brought me groceries during the first wave and I had no problem staying put for two months straight. Even so, the farmstead hasn't saved me from relationships gone sour and periods of suffering. I'm supported here by the atmosphere my ancestors created: my Seto grandmother Patsi (Praskovja) and grandfather Teodor (Höödoŕ) moved here before the Second World War. I'm supported by doing handiwork and practicing my craft. By knowing my daughter is out there somewhere. I'm cared for by the natural environment, which I can absorb into. By the birds and forest animals who sometimes show themselves. By my cat. And occasionally by a faith that flits from somewhere, penetrating deep into me, and can be worded. Occasionally, by a growing knowledge of why I entered the world. To see, write, sing, and love. The first three are really just different forms of love.



LAURI SOMMER · PHOTO BY ALEKSANDER KELPMAN

You recently composed a new collection: selected poems by Ernst Enno, titled *Imelikku rada pikka* (Along a Strange Path). Could you speak a little about him? What led you to Enno and how could someone else find their way to him?

Enno was a founder of Estonian mystic poetry. He had a lucid style and an open view of the world. He was fond of nature (his poetry is set in a wide range of landscapes), introspective, and meditative. Enno influenced several generations of Estonian authors—Masing, Kaplinski, Luik, and Õnnepalu, to name a few. To me, he's one of the most "Estonian" of Estonian poets. Enno wasn't popularized by reviewers or other literary figures, but by children and singers. I believe that true favorites such as him serve as spiritual nourishment for one's entire life. You can always turn back to them and the dialogue carries on. Coming to know Enno was a natural process. I've enjoyed his writing for about 30 years, and it's been a source of support while rambling through nature and in other spiritual moments. I've even used several of his poems as lyrics. I came across a wealth of interesting things in manuscripts and old publications while I was putting the book together. The collection includes eight unpublished poems, and a few unknown quotes and fascinating stories went into the afterword.

You also compiled and translated a collection of Native American poetry into Estonian. The poems have a ritualistic air and could be read by candlelight, or even hummed or semi-sung in the flickering light of a campfire. They remind one that poetry's core and power exist outside of academic study; that it is ancient, secretive, and surprising. Where do you believe that poetry resides?

The poetry I enjoy does not reside in the academic sphere or at poetry slams or pretentious literary events, but on smaller paths and in the deepest layers of human consciousness, which the literary nomenklatura and celebrity entertainers cannot achieve. It surfaces infrequently and in gossamer amounts. Poetry can also reside in a song circle or at a concert. I've been singing South Estonian folk songs for 20 years. They allow me to experience the spirit and poetics of pre-written Estonian poetry—something I used when translating Native American poems. One archaic aspect is oral: phonetic alternation, incantation, words in recitative, and melody. Rappers have adopted this newer folkloric mainspring that includes chronicling contemporary local life, vulgar language, occasional improvisation, and "song battles", now called MC battles. It is living and evolving. It produces a different kind of poetics. And somewhere on the periphery of Estonian poetry are literature in dialect and the few authors who write about nature and mystical experience. I believe I lie somewhere close to that classification.

In order to arrive at Native American poetry, one must probably venture into a world that has already been reduced only to dreams. Though I hope it does still breathe somewhere deep in the greenery to this day… How did you arrive at it? Did getting there affect your own world and existence?

Native Americans are more than just their old myths. Their universe continues to some

LAURI SOMMER · PHOTO BY ALEKSANDER KELPMAN

extent: pow-wows are held, traditional craftwork is practiced, they sing, share old wisdom, try to learn their languages, and strive to preserve uniquely Native characteristics. The primitive ecology put into words by their long-gone chiefs, warriors, and shamans carries a broader generalizing influence. In fact, thought and creativity arise overall from the ability to acclimate. And Estonians, being a small indigenous nation that has been occupied on several occasions, can identify with the minds of Native American tribes. Especially when they've preserved their bond to nature. For me, the interest blossomed as it did for many others: from childhood books and games. Later came the photographs, folk tales, shamanism, songs, traditions, ayahuasca ceremonies, etc. Rare can be preserved with rare. Understanding the basis of Native culture helps to strengthen one's Estonian foundations.

Native American poetry caused me to consider the connection between humans and animals. That thread seems so delicate these days. How could it be protected? What becomes of a person who loses their bond to nature and animals?

Symbiosis with animals dates back to paleolithic hunting societies. Totemism was a totally natural, positive practice that

encompassed the entire ecosystem, and remnants of it still exist in places today. I still miss the friendly goat named Miku that we raised at this farm when I was a boy. I reckon that Estonians were estranged from animals sometime after the Second World War, firstly with the formation of ineffective kolkhozes that had insensitive attitudes towards livestock, operated on strict schedules, and kept oversized herds; and secondly with the rising pace of urbanization. Because of this estrangement, thousands of domesticated animals (and even some wild ones) have become inaccessible to humans, resulting in loss in the lives of both. I have seen today's city kids show great interest in chickens, rabbits, and other penned farm animals. The kids are just a little too aggressive with them because they lack experience handling animals.

Reliable birds and creatures can soothe and help people. This connection can be strengthened by having pets or animal husbandry without purely monetary goals. One must approach a living creature with a blend of curiosity, caution, and knowing how to observe. I'm amazed by the level of comprehension with which Franz Marc painted birds and animals. The more you observe the storks, roe deer, and foxes in your area and write about them, the more your own worldly wisdom is enriched. Putting food out for birds during a cold winter is also a little step towards that oneness. There's a certain melody I use to call to them, and when I'm walking through the woods, some familiar tits will often cheep a little passage back. Anthropocentrism is a dead end, which has been proven by so many natural catastrophes and wars, too. If humankind wishes to persevere and live with dignity, then we must abandon our self-centric ways and establish a lively bond with our environment. Metaphorically speaking, we must learn the language of the birds, animals, and insects.

And perhaps the language of trees as well. In *Endless Wishes*, you have a short story titled "*Yyse massinaga mõtsah*" (On a Harvester in the Woods at Night). The way in which you address clearcutting and trees' spirits in a dark and almost mythological light certainly points to comprehension. Although one cannot transform into a tree, they can certainly try to understand them, and understanding is the first step towards protecting.

Humans and trees have shared the same landscapes for thousands of years, which should have left quite a strong imprint on our minds. Urbanization has reduced the observation or experiencing of trees, and has corralled them into parks. A local counterforce, however, is the Estonian House of Taara and Native Religions (*Maavalla Koda*), which tends to the ideology of sacred trees and sites (*hiied*). One vivid childhood memory is of Jämejala Park and its plethora of species, and when I was four years old, a spirit-tree—an oak was planted for me on this property. Climbing trees was another way to get to know them, of course. Living beneath the canopies of old yard- or orchard trees is akin to spending time in a vaulted church. The partitioning of my woods during asset-splitting and the clear-cut strips turned my hair gray. Still, I've seen that something can also grow out of that pain. A gradually renewing clearing with its open vistas, meadow flora, pine saplings, and berries can be beautiful. Ancient trees that fill you with a sense of holiness grow

around here to this day. I've always enjoyed allées and garden paths. I came across Uku Masing's sacralizing tree mythology a little later in life (he even calls God "the Final Tree" in one work), but life gave me some necessary additions. Living out in the countryside, I'm in constant contact with the more practical side as well: clearing trees felled by storms, chopping and stacking firewood, collecting birchbark from logging sites, and heating my home's ovens are a little like meditation. I wrote an essay on the topics titled "*Puuraiduri märkmed*" (A Logger's Notes), though the experience itself is transformative and I'd like to learn a thing or two more in that area—i.e. the perception that the forest itself teaches, and the knowledge a carpenter can share. Thinning a young forest and clearing paths through it is an exceptional sensation. When I try to weave branches along a path instead of clipping them, the act possesses a kind of symbiosis and life-long creation—the arboreal environment I'm striving to care for just slightly will last long after I'm gone.

Some of your writing reveals a child-like outlook bound with tiny details. It similarly shows fondness for a doomed planet. How do you keep that inner child alive? How do you nourish him?

I'm bolstered by living in my childhood environment. As I walk the landscapes or putter around the rooms, I have occasional encounters with that one-time little boy's thoughts, possessions, and material world. Creative activity can also mean looking after and conversing with that inner child. Still, his existence isn't any self-suited, nostalgic circulation. Other people are the ones who can truly nourish or hurt him, and in that sense, we're all at the whim of unknown vectors.

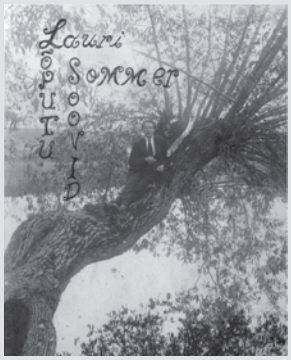
Your short story "*Kureneiu*" (The Stork Maiden) made me think to ask: Do you intend to become a stork someday, too? Where would you fly to?

It's not in my plans, but I do know someone who underwent the transformation on a summer day a couple of years ago. Totemistic logic lives on. Birds and people with high-flying fantasies belong to the same family. The similarities can be seen in their facial structure and personalities. Birds likewise have different preferences for habitat, nutritional habits, mating rituals, and fashions of plumage. There are some who migrate and others who stay in place, etc. My love for singing has made me some part whooping swan, but the raven is my lifelong totem bird, and ravens tend to be rather stationary. It wasn't coincidence that Juhan Jaik, who was born down in the valley at Sänna Manor, immortalized the *kaarnakivi*—a raven's pebble used in witchcraft—right around here. Perhaps I'll spend one of my next lives in the old raven's nest there on the hill past Verioja.

TRIIN PAJA is a poet and a translator from Estonia. Her debut poetry collection, *Nõges* (Nettle, Värske Raamat, 2018), won the Betti Alver Literary Award. She has also won The Juhan Liiv Prize for Poetry and Värske Rõhk Poetry Award. Her poetry in English has appeared in Prairie Schooner, Cincinnati Review, Rattle, Pleiades, Portland Review, and Room, among others, and has been nominated for a Pushcart, Bettering American Poetry, Best of the Net, Best New Poets, and the Rhysling Award.

Grandma's Eve

From the short story collection Wishes of the Eternal
by Lauri Sommer
Translated by Adam Cullen



The Wishes of the Eternal
by Lauri Sommer. Menu, 2020

I think of my dear Grandma, starting from when I was a schoolboy in the early eighties. I'd visit for the potato harvest and Christmastime, and would linger longer in the summer. I would chase the chickens across the yard, play in the sandbox in front of the woodshed, and build a fort on top of the woodpile, just like all children do. I'd dash in and out of doors, willy-nilly. And hanging suspended in the larder was a particular scent, like a faded purple sheet pierced by rays of sunlight. It's the same scent that I now sometimes recall when I'm sitting with Toomas Kuusing. The scent of a rural childhood. Ether. There were many, old and young alike, who took it as medicine or simply knocked back a couple of shots to unwind. The swiftly soaring tipple made its way through the drinker, relaxing the muscles and giving a kind of a fairy-tale sensation that one doesn't get from vodka, wine, or beer. I was a child, living at Grandma's side and observing those old men and women who'd visit and drain a little *stopka* to wash down their stories. They behaved differently than drunkards, never carousing at all. I couldn't peer into their thoughts, of course—I could only study them briefly as I walked past to the

PHOTO BY LAURI SOMMER

other room and snuggled beneath my blanket. Their sedate speech, indecipherable through the wall, caressed me to sleep. Everyone got ready for bed. Sometimes, Aunt Anna came in to stay the night. Her visits were infrequent, though; it was a long ways away from Räpina. I had my own little prayer that I said before falling asleep: "I do not want to have a bad dream, and I don't want anybody else to, either." It worked. For the most part, I slept in that collapsible cot like I was held under an angel's wing. Only during the full moon would something stir in the woods, extend across the fields with the fog, and even intrude as an atmosphere. Clammy light seeped through the gap between the curtains. I'd toss and turn for a long time as I lay in the spacious back room we called "the cold chamber" because Miki would be rattling his chain and barking into the darkness. It had to be nothing more than foxes and hares, but my imagination conjured who-knows-what kinds of dark figures creeping across the field, making my skin crawl. When ghostly shadows began to stalk their way over the mirror, the darkness rippled, and terror squeezed at my throat, I'd quickly flip on the light and read

books like *Talks With a Tiger* or *My Great Grandfather and I*. I would flip through my little collection of foreign bubble gum wrappers, my greatest treasure, which I'd put into a stamp album and brought along from the city. I'd doodle in my reading journal with a marker, scribbling synopses and making caricatures. After my hand tired out, I'd flip off the light again to prick my ears and test my surroundings. A buck barked in the thicket somewhere to the left of Anni's house. It was how the Devil might shriek when mankind stokes his ire and he storms across the land in a foul temper. I ultimately left the light on. Closing my eyes, I drifted towards dreams with tiny jerks. There was no other choice. Well, there was, but only so long as the program lasted. I'd sometimes creep into the living room and watch an episode of *Robin Hood* or any evening show on the black and white TV from behind Grandpa as he dozed. In retrospect, it feels as if those late-night summer broadcasts were filled exclusively with *Robin Hood*'s Clannad tunes and Russian dubbing. So, I stared and daydreamed while Grandpa snored. Neither disturbed the other. Grandpa's day ended with the *Päevakaja* radio weather reports and the TV news program *Vremya*—the "amen" in church. Oksõ came in, thoroughly worn out from pulling weeds in the garden, tossed her gardening clothes onto a peg, slurped from a mug of long-steeped caraway tea, sighed, and flopped into Grandma's bed to curl up next to the wall and sleep. Grandma herself clattered around the kitchen after returning from the barn, sponge-bathed from a washtub that rested on a three-legged stool, pulled on her yellowed nightgown, poured a glass of cold water from the pail, fetched the thickly-corked bottle of ether from the larder, and sat down by the window. Sometimes, the plants in the garden made merry. The scent of flowers and the linden and imbibing bees buzzing in its immense crown gushed through the open window. Somewhere beyond it, the sunlight of a white night spilled onto a strip of canopy; far, far away, barely illuminating the horizon. It was the creation of a new moon and, to me, it also felt like my exhausted grandma's creation anew. Her chores and hardship weren't few. That's something I've realized and come to understand in retrospect. At the time, I simply peeked through the doorway and watched, amazed by how silent she could be. Sitting still with the cat, which had jumped into her lap and promptly unleashed loud purrs. Taking a break. Not coming to watch TV, either. She poured a shot and drank it in that dusky light, and a cascade of perfume permeated the other room's curtains decorated with a pattern of dark red roses. The film ended, Grandpa snored like a tractor, I tiptoed out to take a pee, and then fell asleep. Sometimes, Grandma remained staring quietly out at the garden for a while longer.

The years passed and times changed. Somewhere in a high-level office, a handful of middle-aged men and women decided that ether was a barbaric and poisonous concoction; that its consumption was unfit for the European mindset. That its sale in pharmacies should be banned and it should only be imported in strictly limited quantities so that, at gatherings and in public places, one might no longer come across people whose breath wasn't kosher. That from then on, grandmas must pass their twilights in other ways. Well, my Grandma never saw it.

PHOTO BY LAURI SOMMER

The golden era of Estonian short prose

by Elle-Mari Talivee

The Estonian short-story genre is like a garden filled with branching paths: whereas it seemed orphaned only a few years ago, authors' attention now appears to be fixed on a wide range of brief formats. These sub-genres alternate, overlap, and contrast, each new expression more fascinating than the last.

Special focus must certainly be given to the historical Estonian short-story genre. The classic author and literary critic **Friedebert Tuglas** (1886–1971), who was also a prolific practitioner of the short form, founded an award for the genre in 1971—now the longest continual literary prize in Estonia. Tuglas included a clause in his will bequeathing his royalties to an award for the year's two best Estonian short stories. His own best short works were penned during the 1910s when he was taking political refuge in Finland and Western Europe. The Tuglas novella is an artistic endeavor, a well-organized sonnet in prose. His neatly structured stories generally have a dense plot, few characters, and a single central theme, with ample attention given to the aesthetic.

The Tuglas Short Story Awards are announced on March 2nd, the anniversary of his birth, and are extremely prestigious and coveted among Estonian writers. By 2021, precisely 100 Estonian works had received the honor. Recently, there has been another initiative sponsored by the two-time Tuglas Award laureate **Armin Kõomägi** (b. 1969): the *Eesti novelli 100 aastat* (100 Years of Estonian Short Stories) series. Always eagerly awaited, a new collection of the best short stories from the previous year is now released every spring, putting masterful Estonian storytellers in the spotlight.

The genesis of the Estonian short story has been pinpointed to a work published in 1739, though novellas only took off in late-19th-century Estonian newspapers. Here, I must mention another classic: the acutely social-critical author **Eduard Vilde** (1865–1933), who began dabbling in the genre in the 1880s and also culminated his literary career with it. Vilde's novellas teem

with then-topical issues and his storytelling differs significantly from the Tuglas novella.

It is fascinating to observe today's variations on the classic Estonian short story—how they can be an uninhibited glimpse into modern life that brazenly leave loose ends. They may later blossom into a longer work, just as the writer **Mudlum** (b. 1966; also a recipient of the Tuglas Award) recently accomplished. Namely, the author rewrote a 2014 short story titled "*Minu tädi Ellen*" (My Aunt Ellen), nominated for the Tuglas Award, into a short novel titled *Mitte ainult minu tädi Ellen* (Not Just My Aunt Ellen, 2020), which subsequently won the Cultural Endowment of Estonia's Annual Prize for Literature. The sometimes humorous, sometimes solemn author **Urmas Vadi** (b. 1977) has practiced a similar approach, basing part of a later play on a Tuglas Award-winning short story: ideas that didn't fit into the concise format ended up being so intense that they demanded further expression and expansion. We may, in fact, generally regard the dual cornerstones of the contemporary Estonian short story to be Vilde's ability to write pieces that were tightly wound to the present day and, concurrently, the Tuglas novella, which is an artwork that mirrors a particular problem as an added dimension. The latter classic's timeless short story "Popi and Huhuu" has been translated into several languages and produced as film. It covers an impressive range of topics, including Dutch art, romantic dependence, and Europe on the brink of the First World

War, all told through the lens of a dog and a monkey. Mudlum's short stories alternately tend to lend objects a voice—not as characters, but as an atmosphere or details that are inseparable from the plot itself.

Throughout the Estonian short story's history, multiple giants of the genre have been men: Jaan Kross, Arvo Valton, Mats Traat, and Toomas Vint, to name a few. Yet the short works of female authors are no less fascinating, and possibly even more so; such as works by Mari Saat, Maimu Berg, Eeva Park, Asta Põldmäe, Kai Aareleid, Kätlin Kaldmaa, and more. Two-time Tuglas Award winner **Maarja Kangro** (b. 1973) has perfected the art of the surprise ending. Her writing is usually peopled with courageous, headstrong women, and takes a bold stand for human rights, shadowed in subtle black comedy.

Tuglas was a master at several other short styles: he practiced writing short-short stories, vignettes, and marginalia—extremely brief texts that are all the more polished and coherent. Several important successors and fans of these literary short forms in Estonia have surfaced during the 21st century. Take for example the newly reissued vignette collection by **Jan Kaus** (b. 1971) titled *Tallinna kaart* (Map of Tallinn; 2014, 2021), which is a love letter of sorts to the author's hometown—one in which slivers of the city and ephemeral images make up a complete overarching story. The vignettes were originally inspired by photography of Tallinn and now, the reissue is accompanied by a photo exhibition, in which Kaus's book is labeled a "poetic ecosystem". One of the collection's most intriguing characteristics is its multiplicity of voices, so many characters appearing in such brief sparks creates a genuine urban environment.

Thinking back to last year, I must highlight the memoirs of **Aino Pervik** (b. 1932) in vignette. The brief passages are like crystal-clear droplets, each encompassing an entire glittering world in turn. Another noteworthy trend in Estonian short literature is the contradictorily massive issue of historical and environmental change. One Estonian master of the cultural-historical novella is **Mats Traat** (b. 1936), whose writing endeavors to accurately recreate historical figures and their settings. Even so, echoes of the recent past still creep into his short stories (flashes of Vilde!), weaving together the past- and present day. In its very brevity, the short story is thus a genre from which readers can discover a wealth of knowledge about Estonia.

Another Vilde-like author is the prolific **Andrus Kivirähk** (b. 1970), who pens on-the-mark political satire alongside his novels, dramas, and riveting children's literature. Kivirähk pokes endless fun at human foolishness, but invariably does so with empathy. Last year, the caricaturist and (animated) filmmaker **Ave Taavet** (b. 1988) published her debut collection, which can similarly be categorized as flash fiction. Taavet has remarked: "When I write and spend time in the universe of some of my characters, it's inevitable to develop an intimate relationship. It's as if they materialize." I feel as though several Estonian authors can relate (at least when writing short stories) and strive to see all sides of a person. **Tauno Vahter** (b. 1978), a publisher who released his own debut collection in 2020 (more news on that later!), somewhat embodies the idea of the short story

as an anecdote. Most of his stories evoke a chuckle at one point or another, as he practices a Kivirähk-like style with frankness; and empathy with a playful jab. Vahter is quick to address relevant topics, the covid-19 pandemic having naturally already made an artful appearance in his writing.

Jüri Kolk (b. 1972) has published several short-story collections that are packed with humor and unexpected turns. He and Kivirähk have, naturally, both received the Tuglas Award. The two, and Vahter, are adept at writing short form in a way that every added piece of information is the turn of a screw leading to an unforeseen final twist.

Yet to whom should you turn if you wish to give the imagination free reign and arrive at an outlandish, unimaginable setting? The answer is unequivocally three-time Tuglas Award winner **Mehis Heinsaar** (b. 1973). Heinsaar's short stories have been classified as "magical realism" even though the realities he conjures leave no question as to their genuine existence—it's only a matter of one's ability to experience and observe. His latest short-story collection, *Unistuste tappev kasvamine* (The Killing Growth of Dreams), was published in 2016. The work is something of a complete novel told throughout individual stories, with the joyful pain of existence at their core. Heinsaar's bizarre tales are supranational, even if their common setting is a mystical Estonia: his collections have been published in Italian, Russian, Danish, Hungarian, French, and English translations, and are currently being translated into Japanese.

The Estonian short-story genre is also enriched by the fresh Russian-Estonian literary niche: authors of note from last year include **P. I. Filimonov** (b. 1975), who writes in both Russian and Estonian, and **Ilya Prozorov** (b. 1987), as well as the novelist **Andrei Ivanov** (b. 1971). In a recent interview, Prozorov remarked that "the writer is an emigrant who travels from this reality into an imagined one." Short stories are highly demanding, particularly due to their brevity: the "emigrant" must immediately pull the reader as a whole into that new reality. This is a skill that Heinsaar, for one, possesses with impeccable precision.

In summary, I'll say that the short styles of Estonian literature are fascinating by way of their boundless variety. Especially in regard to length, structure, unusual subject matter, and the fact that the level of quality has remained unwaveringly high since the genre's earliest days. Last year's *Estonian Short Stories* collection has been described as a literary smorgasbord serving everything from pickles and pickled garlic to succulent strawberries—and a range of emotions from extreme reticence to entrancing coarseness.

Shortly before the publication of this issue of *ELM*, it turned out that the 101st and 102nd recipients of the Tuglas Award are the secretive **Lilli Luuk** and **Tauno Vahter**. *Estonian Short Stories 2021*, another fresh and comprehensive overview of the genre, will be released in May 2021.

ELLE-MARI TALIVEE researches Estonian literature at the Under and Tuglas Literature Center's museum department, and at the Estonian Literature Center. She is very fond of cities with rich literary histories and gardens.

Love and its preservation are life's marrow. Ellen Niit and her poetry

by Maarja Undusk

Ellen Hiob, later Niit, was born Friday July 13th, 1928, in Tallinn. Her father, Otto Fromhold Hiob, was a coppersmith and a city boy from birth. Her mother, Helene (née Morell), moved to the capital from the Rebase farmstead, near the town of Keila, and was a trained seamstress. Ellen's ties to her mother's childhood home were very dear to her—the juniper-dotted, scraggly low growth on the limestone cliffs of Northern Estonia hold a more important place in her writing than the wooden slums of 1930s Tallinn. Ellen spent every childhood summer at Rebase, which was tended by her uncle and aunts, and the roots of her poetry also burrow into that "earth in flesh and bone".

Ellen believed the foundation of her poetic eloquence stemmed from her maternal relatives' Protestant education and a lifestyle that was supportive of performance skills, i.e. Sunday school and the church choir in which her mother sang. Ellen herself was a first-generation university graduate, just like many of her peers.

Ellen Hiob's first published poem was "*Rõõmus perenaine*" (The Cheerful Housewife), which appeared in the May 1945 issue of the newspaper *Noorte Hääl* (Voice of Youth) when she was 16. It was likely submitted to the paper by her literature teacher, who took it from a school bulletin board. One year later, Ellen took part in a massive USSR-wide youth hobby competition, winning first place in the categories of poetry performance and original literary work. Her two awarded poems were published in the Estonian literary magazine *Looming* in the summer of 1946. "*Õnn*" (Happiness) became the lyrics for an Estonian Song Festival piece commissioned by Edgar Arro, which was performed by male choirs at the 1947 celebration.

As much of the rest of Europe rejoiced over peace during that impoverished post-war era, it became clear that the Soviet occupation of the Baltic states was going to last a long time. Every family had someone who was killed or wounded in the war, and the first wave of deportations that swept

ELLEN NIIT · PHOTO FROM THE FAMILY ARCHIVE, 1946

the country in June 1941 traumatized the Estonian nation as a whole. Much of Tallinn was destroyed in the Soviet bombing of March 1944. Ellen watched the glow of Tallinn burning from their distant Rebase farmyard, and went into the city the next day to observe the destruction firsthand.

Nevertheless, things could (and did) get worse. In spite of this, Ellen still graduated from high school during a relatively tolerable time, in political terms—before the academics and educators who taught during the first period of Estonian independence were fully oppressed and pre-war mentalities were suffocated in schools. In those years, the regime hadn't yet managed to totally liquidate the culture and printed word of the "era of bourgeoisie dictatorship", which still trickled down to the younger generations. The Soviet Union's political repressions culminated when Ellen was attending university in Tartu between 1947–1952. Criticized for writing poetry "unfit" for a Soviet citizen, she was ordered to pen ideologically acceptable verse instead. One of Ellen's poems that caused a particular furor was the sublime "*Maarja lahkumine*" (Mary's Departure), which appeared in print for the first time ever only just last year in a collection of her selected works.

Dispirited by the harsh criticism and condemnation, Ellen stopped writing poetry for several years and concentrated instead on poetic translation during her time as a college student and researcher, focusing mainly on poems by the Hungarian revolutionary bard Sándor Petőfi. Ellen Niit published her first collection of original poetry, *Maa on täis leidmist* (The World Is Full of Discovery), in 1960, a full fifteen years after her debut. This lengthy wait was due, on the one hand, to Stalinist oppression, and on

ELLEN NIIT · PHOTO FROM THE FAMILY ARCHIVE, 1979

the other to the high standards the author set for herself. She had already grown out of the raw, naïve poetry of youth, but writing anything that yielded to the political dictates was naturally out of the question as well. By then, Ellen had graduated from university, finished her postgraduate studies, married a college classmate named Heldur Niit, become a mother (their son Toomas was born in 1953), moved to Tallinn, divorced, moved in with Jaan Kross five years after his return from Siberian exile, and given

birth to yours truly (1959). Kross flourished to become one of the most outstanding writers in Estonian history, though he was still generally unknown to the public in the mid-1950s. It was during this period—a few years after meeting Kross and before their cohabitation; a time of passion and woes—that she wrote a significant portion of her very best romantic poetry.

Niit began working as a freelance writer in 1963, ushering in a stable and, in many respects, superlative period of her life during which she and Kross had more children (Eerik-Niiles, b. 1967; Märten, b. 1970), raised them together, and engaged in close and constant intellectual collaboration. The couple lived in the Writers' House in Tallinn's Old Town until their deaths.

By her own volition, Ellen ran the practical side of household affairs and supported the family on multiple fronts: as a driver, plumber, dishwasher, social worker, and advocate of Estonian children's literature. Her nerves of steel and brilliant aptitude for coordinating family life, sometimes finding excellent helpers and substitutes to take care of everyday tasks when needed, helped her to stay firmly in the saddle, guarantee undisturbed peace for her husband's writing, and simultaneously manage to write prolifically herself. Jaan Kross was forced to waste eight and a half years of his life in Soviet gulags and exile—Niit never tired of stressing that she wanted to gift Jaan's lost time back to him. This, she accomplished severalfold, unquestioningly, and always with upbeat gratitude, often toning her own personality down to the background while knowing resolutely in her heart that her own creative springs and the marrow of life were love and its preservation.

If I'd Known You Before

If I'd known you before,
I'd have given you
my yellow snow shovel,
my red sand shovel,
and the blue bucket
with stars on its side.

I'd have given you
all the dandelion lawns
and the sand pits and the hopscotch squares,
and every single boulevard
blanketed in leaves and chestnuts,
and the longest sledding lanes down ditches
that I knew of.
And all the rain barrels
beneath drainpipes with
black-glinting water, with
black-glinting bottomless water, with
black-glinting water that spoke of
sky, treetop, and cloud flight.
(What strange subtext so sublime!)

And even that oddness
which, peering in,
rose to my throat
like a bird,
like a soul,
like a bumblebee.

And, I even believe,
the yellow teddy bear
with his worn snout, the yellow bear
with all the secrets he knew of,
I'd have given to you
to keep.

And then, no doubt, I'd have cried,
not knowing of whether
out of pity or of joy.

Niit proved to be a fruitful writer of sunny children's literature in the 1960s. After *The Tales of Pille-Riin*, which the author called her dissertation in children's literature, she wrote several more children's books in rhyme: *Karud saavad aru* (The Bears Will Understand), *Pähklist paat* (A Nut Boat), *Lahtiste uste päev* (Open Door Day), and *Oma olamine, turteltulemine* (One's Own Beings and Comings). Several of Niit's rhyming children's poems were put to music by Estonian composers and thus embarked on their own semi-folkloric paths. One of the first was the song "*Rongisõit*" (The Train Ride) by Gustav Ernesaks, which every Estonian child of both that era and today knows by heart. Niit also collaborated closely with the celebrated Estonian composer Arne Oit. Her most wide-reaching children's work was perhaps *Suur maalritöö* (The Great Painter), which was published in 1971 with fantastic illustrations by the artist Edgar Valter and is a work of art that truly speaks to all generations. The work is a genesis story in graceful verse: the Painter brings motley color to the whole gray world, but in the end, as all the colors start to blend together, he becomes fascinated by white and uses it to cover everything in a blanket of calming snow.

Ellen was very active in the community, speaking at schools and daycares, and participating in literary committees and juries for writing competitions. She was outspoken on social issues and frequently stood up for mothers and children alike, emphasizing the great importance and lack of appreciation for the job of raising a family. One of her many principles was that writing intended for children should reach slightly higher than their comprehension level, in order to enable and encourage intellectual effort. The print runs of Ellen's children's books exponentially outnumbered those of her poetry collections (during the Soviet occupation, 50,000 was completely normal for a children's book, while 6,000 was common for poetry—an unbelievable figure by today's standards. It should be noted, however, that an unbelievable 2 million copies of *The Tales of Pille-Riin* were published in Moscow!). This is no doubt one reason why many Estonians only know of her children's works and sometimes have never heard that she also wrote for an adult audience, despite the fact that the latter was her most cherished form of self-expression. Niit's second adult poetry collection, *Linnuvoolija* (The Bird Sculptor), was published ten years after the first, and was subsequently followed by *Vee peal käija* (Walking on Water, 1977) and a thicker collection of collected works, *Maailma pidevus* (Continuity of the World, 1978). Her poems are also nicely curated in the three-edition work *Paekivi laul* (The Song of Limestone; 1967, 1998, 2008). The author traditionally selected her book titles from one of the given collection's more meaningful poems, and by progressing through the particular arrangement or poetic cycle, we can find a neat and elegant overview of her verse. Although Niit lived a nearly perfect life in her finest years, regardless of the trying conditions that Soviet occupation imposed, her poetry sometimes seems as if it were written in the fourth-floor cell of a city of stone. Still, her roots clung firmly to childhood, to the flesh and bone of earth, and she never failed to emphasize that fact.

Whereas Niit was cheerful and witty, both as an individual and a children's author, her adult poetry has more of a solemn tone and feels pained, though not melodramatic.

ELLEN NIIT · PHOTO BY MAARJA UNDUSK, 2004

Clean rhyme and rhythm were crucial to her style, and she polished her free verse poetry with particular fastidiousness.

Ellen Niit the children's author was lighthearted and confident, just as she was in person. One will find no tears or misery in her writing, nor is there any pedagogical finger-wagging. She remains loyal to the child, though she is just as demanding in her children's poetry as she is of her adult audience, refusing to make concessions in the purity of rhyme or rhythm, or in her progression of thought. Niit's style is juicy and rich in limber humor. Her dialogues are bursting with empathy and wordplay.

At the same time, there is a very meditative seriousness to her adult poetry. Masquerading and coquetry were totally foreign to her in life and poetry alike.

The Years Go by in a Flash

The years go by in a flash,
only the days are sometimes slow.
Nights that arise between days like a dash
the long and wonderful fable do know.

Whoever has the sense to dream at night
and is bright, bushy-tailed in the day—
for him, work's as easy as pie, alright,
grown up or a child—either way.

Work is as easy as pie for his kind.
A job well done is a flower in hand.
At night, he rests his body and mind
while the blisters heal in that hand.

Life goes by so swiftly,
the child grows up before long,
the adult turns old very quickly,
and still, it's a comforting song.

Yet as the years fall away in a blur,
I've been troubled at times by the thought:
we should talk more often and never defer,
before it starts to get dark.

MAARJA UNDUSK (b. 1959) is an artist and author. Her first poetry collection, *Tõsimäng* (A Serious Game), was published under the pseudonym Madli Morell in 1983. *Muriaad*, a story in verse featuring her own drawings, was released in 2020, 37 years after Undusk's debut. In recent years, she has mainly focused on researching the life and works of her mother, Ellen Niit, and composing a book on the topic.

5+5

A conversation between poets Maimu Berg and Taavi Eelmaa

Maimu Berg has long been an Estonian household name as a journalist and author of prose. Taavi Eelmaa, on the other hand, gained widespread fame foremost as an actor. Both made their poetry debuts in 2020: Berg with her collection *Vanaema paneb vihmavarju kinni* (Grandma Folds Her Umbrella) and Eelmaa with *Electraumur*, which also received the Betti Alver Award for Debut Literature. *ELM* asked the two budding poets to sit down together and discuss the things that matter to them.

Berg asks, Eelmaa responds

"Longings and desires are suspended in a moment, in temporality, fostering visions, fancies, words." I found your collection to be completely disconnected from your roles on stage or in films. It's more of a book for reading than for performing. What inspired you to write that particular type of poetry? Where did you find the associations and metaphors? Does an actor who writes poetry hear yet-unwritten poems in his head while standing on stage but not presently speaking any lines?

You're correct about reading. These poems are easier to read in your head; they're not meant to be performed. If any spark joy or understanding, then it's meant solely for the reader and doesn't have to be passed on. The poems don't need public resonation. They're messages from one catacomb to another and perfect just the way they are: mute, helpless, and on paper.

I have a keen interest in pre-linguistic mental states; in the "gray area" between soma and psyche, which isn't yet consciousness, but is also not subliminal. In the moment between sleeping and waking. In the current that culture and public norms haven't yet corrected. In other words, in the undisturbed streaming of archetypes, symbolism, and mythology.

'Actor' and 'poet' are no more than a couple of professional cloaks that one must don from time to time, but not wear incessantly. Personally, I don't judge one's talent based solely on the activity from which they earn

a living or make a name for themselves. Even though it's been years since I last acted on stage, you also referred to me as an actor. But, well, like I said—I don't judge myself, either. I remain deferential and allow myself to be called an actor or a poet without much bemusement. It's true that you have to be called something in order to be recognized. Even if that 'something' is an actor.

What are your thoughts on end rhyme in poetry?

I like it. I believe it's something for the advanced writer. End rhyme holds might in the hands of a master; it is concentrated and in control of emotion. Obviously, a fragile flame burns best inside a storm lantern, shielded from the wind. End rhyme is that storm lantern preventing the fragile flame from flickering out. Or it's a signifier that gives the poem's overall atmosphere a polar opposite tonality, if necessary—as in your own works. Turning naïve style into sarcasm.

You won the Betti Alver Award. Does she count amongst your favorite authors? Who does?

Although Betti Alver hasn't made it onto my list of favorites, I was greatly honored to receive the award that bears her name. And there's no better time to receive an award for debut poetry when you're on the cusp of turning 50. I've been influenced most by Michel Houellebecq, medieval saints and Gnostics, and science fiction.

Are you a tender and sensitive person, perhaps even too tender for this era? Is that difficult?

TAAVI EELMAA · PHOTO BY PIIA RUBER

To be fair, there isn't a person who isn't tender. Or, rather, who doesn't possess a tenderness. In spite of all the rhetoric and public campaigns, everyone knows that such tenderness needs protection, a mask. It is the "persona", which for some has turned out more clever, and for others, less.

What good is amusement to a nihilist?

You're absolutely right. None at all. It's a delight to free oneself of the dictatorship of usefulness. Such a thing is accessible to a poet. The same goes for liberation from collective pressure. A poet is permitted to regard even their basest of layers reverentially and without disgust. Human existence, as a whole, isn't composed solely of what we have in common. There is also something not subject to public debate, something limited to the individual. And that 'something' in no way matters less to me than that, into which we're all thrown together. The individual is secondary and a minority in every situation, already. And yet, it is the individual who possesses the indivisible; the atom; that, which is most universal.

Eelmaa asks, Berg responds

In many of your poems, you employ romantic expressionism and the primary tool of decadence, boldly associating the unassociatable, tying the sentimental to the blasphemic or the humorous to the terrible. The same device is used willfully in science fiction. Depending on the register you choose in your poetry, it acquires either a sarcastic attitude or one of equal observation. In any case, a new symbology takes shape and hints at a kind of distancing and unique satirical assessment of contemporary conventions. How do you view that assessment?

Irony and sarcasm has been brought up in reviews of my writing from time to time, especially in regard to my short stories. For years, I penned columns for a number of different publications. Perhaps it whetted those qualities. Their roots might also extend somewhere deep into childhood and youth, as psychoanalysts believe in such cases. Even when I set out to write something genuinely tender, it's prone to shift sooner or later, to my dismay. I believe that type of cynicism may stem from cowardice or fear of getting hurt. Just like distance and an observing stance.

Your descriptions are incredible, especially in prose. With photographic precision, you're able to tie your writing to a powerful inner emotion. Even in your poetry, you use lifelike descriptions, exact recollections of events, and highly specific impressions. How important are these "pictures" in defining yourself? Does the "what" matter less than "in what way"?

I suppose that's just my style. I don't endeavor for complex analysis, for the most part, probably in the hopes that the psychological twists and jitters of all shapes and colors can thereby still emerge if they need to. You're right, I believe—"in what way" matters more to me, and like I said, that should lead to the "what" and the "why", too.

Should emotional, expressive poetry contain something other than human sentiment and a kaleidoscope of emotions?

Simplified, one can also write from the perspective of nature, be it animate or inanimate—a cloud, a rubber tree, a hamster—and

MAIMU BERG · PHOTO BY PIIA RUBER

it's been done many a time before. But, in the end, those are also instances of human emotion. When I read animal stories as a child, it was nice to imagine that a duck or a badger was thinking, acting, and speaking just like people do.

Held against a backdrop of intermittent peculiarities, a steady scene from which certain elements do stand out, your poetry seems to have something that could be called "the melancholy of memory". Although you do not immerse fully in nostalgia, your writing conveys a powerful, mellow sensation similar to a still life. As a poet, is that the primary ingredient from which everything else rises?

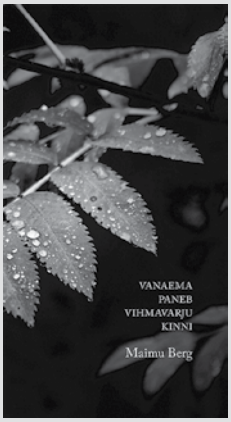
The melancholy of memory—that's right on the mark. Yes, I do practice it, sometimes excessively. Although I live in the now and don't stray into nostalgia too often, my writing is oftentimes stuck in the past.

The use of end rhyme in your latest collection tends to transform into a sneering at tenderness or some kind of melancholy for that which has passed. Is this a means for coping with pain?

I'm not a fan of end rhyme and always end up writing doggerel. Back when I was working at a magazine called Siluett, the whole Soviet Ministry of Light Industry commissioned me to write all kinds of poems for bigwigs and department anniversaries, etc. It's too bad I didn't collect them somewhere—there'd be a lot to laugh at today. Writing poetry in end rhyme certainly isn't easy, and I'm all the more amazed by those who pull it off. Still, I believe the era of end rhyme is over for now.

Poetry

by Maimu Berg and Taavi Eelmaa
Translated by Adam Cullen



Maimu Berg
From the collection Grandma Folds Her Umbrella. Tuum, 2020

Once Upon a Time

Mother and I went to the public sauna
every Saturday—
a long, low building
on Veerenni Street
where there are luxury apartments now.
It was both a men's and women's sauna.
The men never returned from the war.
They rotted in the forest.
Froze to death in Siberia.
You had to stand in line at the women's sauna
to see
the strange creatures,
old women

with big, flabby bellies,
swollen legs and varicose veins,
scrawny, red-smattered thighs,
sparse and scraggly hairs along their chins.
You had to in order to inhale
the sedating scent of the hot water
as it gushed from the tap into a tin tub,
titillating stinging spray
peppering your arms and abdomen.
You had to in order to sit before a locker
and sip a soft drink from a pre-occupation bottle
with a white porcelain cap.
Surrounded by old women who have long since turned to dust,
women from the century before last,
old hags with angry, wrinkled faces,
a stage between life and death,
between two centuries.
Just as I am now.

An Island Legend

Where do children come from?
Nonexistence?
Oh, no! They come from a pigpen in Sweden.
The hour comes
and the shepherd shrinks and shrinks
until he's so tiny
he can hide behind a pebble.
There, he waits
until a young woman arrives,
her belly swollen from yearning
for a child,
checks behind all the pebbles,
and finally finds her baby.

Taavi Eelmaa
From the collection Elektraumur. Verb, 2020

BLACK AMETHYST

The lily's repose is here,
in silence.
Its waking is elsewhere.
The dream is a blossom.

Blossom and dream grasp at where there shouldn't be
anything. Clinging
to darkness while falling, having faith in good fortune
and offering the best.

Love is craving
for one's own silence.
For one's own minutes
in that same silence.

In that same blossom
into which craving flows,
into which the lily streams.
In that very same silence.

In one's own repose.

///

When I was little, I wanted to find out
who lives between human bodies.
Who confirms a city's late-night desolation, institutes melancholy,
and calls loneliness
by its true name.

When I grew up, I myself became it.
Unwillingly and by trial.
Had I known, perhaps
I wouldn't have been so curious.

Now, as my second childhood
comes to a close,
I can state that the hardest thing of all,
sometimes even unbearable,
immeasurably tougher than tolerating your own life,
is tolerating your one and only
most precious playmate's
face as it slowly
grows gloomier,
older,
I'm sorry.
more melancholy,

Forgive me.
more distant.
Thanks.

I love you.

Book reviews

Book reviews by Siim Lill, Helena Läks and Jaanika Palm

MUDLUM · PHOTO BY PIIA RUBER

MUDLUM
MITTE AINULT MINU TÄDI ELLEN
(NOT JUST MY AUNT ELLEN)
Strata, 2020, 208 pp
ISBN 9789916400791

At the core of Mudlum's awarded autobiographical novel *Mitte ainult minu tädi Ellen* (Not Just My Aunt Ellen) is, as the title betrays, the narrator's relationship with her aunt. Mudlum writes that there was no soul more witty or sparkling than her Aunt Ellen on her good days, adding: "Her bad days, on the other hand, brought another dimension to my world. A dimension that was greater, deeper, and immense." The stories centered on Aunt Ellen also bring to light the author's relationships with her mother, children, and Ellen's sister. *Not Just My Aunt Ellen* is set in the home owned by Ellen and the Estonian author Juhan Smuul in Merivälja, a suburb of Tallinn. Ellen finds herself alone in the house before long. A refuge from the world, it progressively deteriorates. The yard becomes choked with weeds, and ultimately, the utilities are all cut off.

Mudlum simultaneously details her own life on the island of Muhu, where she similarly struggles with encroaching nature and deteriorating buildings at the farmstead inherited from her mother. She groans over its endurance and questions why she hasn't sold it off yet, knowing the answer all the while: probably the fear of "lost places". So long as ownership is maintained, she can be away from the farmstead for long periods of time while knowing there's always the possibility to return. But once the house is no more, there's no choice other than to simply hold onto its memory, and memory entails great pain and responsibility. There's always a nagging feeling that anything lost deserved greater attention, which would have entailed a greater amount of more complete memories today.

Ellen's house was sold after her death and a new one built in its place. Mudlum records Ellen's universe and all that she experienced with such a precise and sensitive palette that even a tiny branch or light cast by a lamp possess meaningful roles in the overall picture.

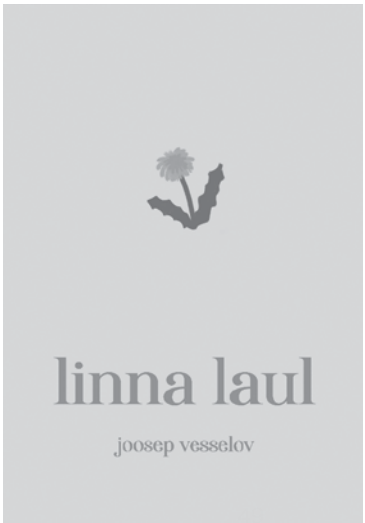
One cannot miss the deep connection between Mudlum and objects in this work, as well as in her earlier award-winning books. Why are they so numerous? Why are they deserving of so much attention? One could ask instead: how else can lost worlds be described? As humans, we surround ourselves with possessions, hoping to attain joy, support, or some other benefit. We communicate with objects and use them to communicate with others. We can be disappointed by them, but hold anything we don't throw away close, as if keeping a spark of hope alive. Possessions are wrapped in beliefs and superstitions. Whenever Mudlum speaks of objects, she is always really speaking about people, and can often say much more indirectly. It seems somehow possible to enormously expand oneself by way of their tiny, dusty worlds. **HL**

JOOSEP VESSELOV
LINNA LAUL
(SONG OF THE CITY)

Kultuurileht, 2020, 72 pp.
ISBN 9789949725366

Nominated for the 2020 Betti Alver Award for Debut Literature and awarded with Siuru scholarship, Joosep Vesselov's poetry

JOOSEP VESSELOV · PHOTO BY KRIS MOOR



collection *Linna laul* (Song of the City) is a witty, brisk work with wonderful rhythm and handsome style. At its core is the university town of Tartu.

Ever since Estonia's first institute of higher education was established in the 17th century, Tartu's streets have been walked by students practicing various degrees of diligence. They dampen the cobblestones with beer, urine, and tears as they belt out songs and anthems till the early morning hours. As the lyrics to a popular song go: "The truest student sings heartily forth, / he straightens up in elation: / 'This is our best-ever binge / and you must cherish it, Lord.'"[1] Vesselov's Tartu seems to thirst for student life and song, for the city itself is alive: "the city / mightily rustles / and gleefully writhes / within incessant song."

It turns out that a plague of poetry is spreading through the local population, making anyone infected belt out their own songs: a scholar, a witch, seagulls, a fiction writer, and others. The epidemic evolves into a bond between the modern-day citizens and a hidden, more archaic, membrane of reality: the songs are creation myths for various sites around Tartu. Each telling strange tales about how the city's well-known and bizarre features came to be. It's as if the city itself unleased the disease upon its residents so that they might sing tales about it. Yet, the origins might also lie elsewhere, and the use of genesis stories could point instead to a desire to influence the urban environment or make it yield to the observer entirely. Once you know how someone came to be, you hold power over their soul. Vesselov appears to have actively considered this animalistic foundation while assembling the collection. The impression gains traction from a direct reference to a poem by Hasso Krull ("When the Stones Were Still Soft", 2014) that is likewise interwoven with creation myth: "across a river said / to yet be unnamed / and the cobblestones were still soft."

Songs of the City can be read as a love letter to an urban environment whose rhythms and residents are so familiar to the author that he dares to gently poke fun at them. It is a place that one wishes well, as "without song, / the city turns boring and / dull; / it wilts." **HL**

1 *From the original German-language "Student Sein" by Josef Buchhorn, music by Otto Lob. Translated into Estonian by C.-Ch. Frey and in this review from the Estonian version into English.*

ANDREI IVANOV
PARIISI ARABESKID
(PARIS ARABESQUES)

Tuum, 2020, 318 pp.
ISBN/ISSN: 9789949743315

The name Andrei Ivanov immediately brings to mind riveting novels, making the author's new collection of short stories and essays somewhat unanticipated. But then, you remember something else—the short pieces he's published, primarily in literary magazines, are just as fascinating to read. *Paris Arabesques* is no exception, bundling together novellas that are reinforced by a bouquet of literary arabesques and musings, and concluding with several essays.

Leading off the book are stories that are essentially sequels to Ivanov's award-winning Scandinavian trilogy. In them, we

ANDREI IVANOV · PHOTO BY RAUNO VOLMAR / EKSPRESS MEEDIA / SCANPIX

meet familiar characters: the narrator Euge, Hanuman, and others. Although the stories could function as a trilogy themselves, that would be the wrong approach. It's better, in this case, to leave overarching structures aside and treat the pieces as free-standing works, as they need no bolstering. Readers enter the world of a Danish refugee camp: fragments of fragmented lives that have been swept together from points across the globe. We meet colorful figures waiting for a residency permit, deportation, lust, mushrooms, weed, or mere happiness; be they Serbs, Somali, Russians, Chinese… Occasionally the refugees' existence collides with that of the locals: evangelists striving to meet missionary quotas ("Whenever any of them tried to strike up a conversation, I'd play the fool, grinning like an idiot and pretending not to understand. It suited them, and that suited me even more. […] They'd shift to sit farther away and cast startled glances as if I were a domesticated ape, and eventually ignore me completely," p. 39), and cops who "stomped heavily on all the humanist drivel that Red Cross workers poured into asylum-seekers' ears." (p. 83) These lives sometimes intersect with one another, leading to bloodshed and romance.

In the main story, which lends its title to the collection, the author steps in as narrator: "His life could have been exquisite. Unfortunately, he wrote…" (p. 158) He is a writer drifting around a metropolis that is "smooth, straight, and clearly defined" (p. 153); a writer who runs into local celebrities and refugees puffing potent hashish; a writer who drinks heavily and listens to music despised by his cat; a writer who has seen much of the world, leads us this way and that, and relishes in coffee and the headaches it gives (flirting with his blood pressure); a writer who writes in dialogue with the literary greats, but does so delicately, entering only into transient conversation, quoting briefly, and mentioning names in just the right places, erudition and tenor flickering in ideal amounts; a writer who, as if in conversation with the narrators of his earlier short stories, can claim that "if the whole world were to live like they do in Scandinavia, then it wouldn't quiver like a yo-yo in a psychopath's hands…" (p. 167)

It's an endless circle that leads to melancholy at times, but is absolutely gripping: "And you're back at the very same place you were before: do you remember the bits of coal on Stroomi Beach? [...] blazing notebooks and scraps of paper [...] look at where you are, where you begin, your pinky is bleeding, smashed bottle, blood, coals, sand, twenty years ago, even a little more, twenty-one [...] your torched rubbish floats and settles upon you like revenge, the devils circle and dance, those very same walls still stand, impenetrable, withstanding, you yourself haven't changed, neither has the world around you, there is no new era, time doesn't even exist, there are only traps, chimeras, illusions, disappointment, the dimming of sense, bowing to stumps, to bits of paper, to effigies, to stars, no one has left Noah's ark." (p. 166)

The characters converse, kill time, smoke, and sleep; cats turn docile and the penned arabesques vanish and reemerge to our delight. Ivanov makes no concessions—his writing is consistently brilliant and memorable, begging to be reread on repeat.

Rounding out the collection are four essays in which he writes about other writers: Lyudmila Ulitskaya, Kazuo Ishiguro, László Krasznahorkai, and Péter Nádas. They are fascinating expeditions into the literary figures' cosmoses with superb references to 'secondary literature', but at the same time resemble the preceding stories. We continually shift between the outer world and Ivanov's inner workings—the dialogue and blending of different worlds are engrossing.

"[...] when the raspberries were just ripening, we found a meadow with tons of them and spent a long time picking. "Stalking" was the preferred method: you'd pick a long, thin blade of grass and poke it through the biggest and firmest berries. Later, I walked around the camp holding my stalk and showing it to everyone I encountered. I had no inclination to eat the raspberries; I just wanted to show them off (and I'm still doing the same today, in a sense—deep within my mind is a meadow I run off to every day to pick a stalk or two of berries before going around and showing them off to everyone)." (p. 180)

Who wouldn't want to sample and appreciate the choicest berries? Since Ivanov has remarked that writing is a necessity, we can expect much more to come. As he said in a recent interview: "I enjoy being inside a novel. It's cozy in there; it's home. I feel protected. My imagination looks after me: I drift through the novel as if I'm in a capsule moving through space, and nothing bad can happen. That's how I cope with a world that assaults us with ever renewed force." **SL**

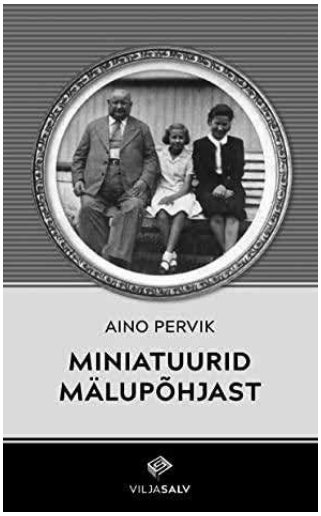
AINO PERVIK

MINIATUURID MÄLUPÕHJAST
(VIGNETTES FROM MEMORY'S DEPTHS)

Salv, 2020, 90 pp
ISBN 9789949734139

The name Aino Pervik is known by every Estonian reader. Anyone unfamiliar with her novels, poetry, or translations of Hungarian literature has at least encountered her classic children's books. Yet, applying genres to Pervik's works actually diminishes the value and greatness of the stories—even a person nearing the end of their mortal coil has much to learn from

AINO PERVIK · PHOTO BY KARIN KALJULÄTE / EKSPRESS MEEDIA / SCANPIX



beloved characters like Arabella and Old Mother Kunks.

Vignettes from Memory's Depths is a collection of poetic fragments of memory from the writer's childhood that are blended with snapshots from today. Pervik speaks for a fading generation: "There aren't very many of us pre-Soviet Estonians left here in the year 2020. And we don't always understand one another, either." (p. 8) The book was released by the rather young publisher Salv, which has been issuing handsomely designed works in appealing formats.

Writing vignettes isn't easy, or at least it seems that way. When reading other masters of the style, the true classics, one often gets the impression that much has been left unpolished; it is difficult to identify with numerous texts that appear alongside brilliant pearls. This isn't the case with Pervik. Each and every piece in the collection is a glittering pearl in a gracefully arcing necklace. An unusual year already, 2020 was also a time of vignettes in Estonian literature—for example, Øyvind Rangøy's fascinating flashes of childhood memories in his collection *Oled ikka veel see poiss* (You Are Still That Boy). Pervik's writing also takes us back to earlier days ("My fondest memory from childhood is of home itself: Mother, Father, and tiny me," p. 64), into which the grim tones of the late 1930s nevertheless work their way ("Orchards are freezing to death in the frigid cold. People are dying in battles." (p. 59) The author's recollections trail off in the 1940s and resurface in the present. Pervik describes the intervening period with a sentence that is open for interpretation: "I'm sitting on the beach in Võsu, on this side of a barbed-wire fence, staring across a strip of plowed land, out towards the sea, and weeping softly." (p. 28)

Childhood memories constantly mingle with those from the present. Several settings recur, such as the square next to the Estonia Theater, which transforms from a marketplace to ruins and then to a perpetually reorganized park. The capitalist boom of the 1930s is replaced by the spring of our recent pandemic: "Everything is changing once again. No one yet knows how life will progress." (p. 19) Only spring remains unvaried, coming and going year after year.

Scents are often triggers that sweep us into a vivid past. Many Estonian authors (Viivi Luik, for example) have conveyed this phenomenon in a highly animated fashion. As Pervik writes: "Some moments stay clear in your mind for your entire life: colors, shadows, scents. The feeling of happiness." Still, smells can lead her beyond the blissful emotion of the past; out of it and away. "The scent [of hyacinth] takes me back somewhere. Not to childhood. Not to any time or place. It takes me somewhere I cannot name or describe. Somewhere into myself, perhaps, or to a total nonexistence that isn't even found in imagination, but is still undeniably there. Somewhere happy." (p. 26) A similar, inexplicable sensation arises when reading her fragments of memories—even though it is someone else's story, it summons a kind of melancholy that slowly, slowly transforms into an ambiguous capital-e Emotion. It is the Emotion that overwhelms you when you read incredible writing that will stay with you for a very long time to come.

Of course, Pervik also records details from everyday life. The burden of history, which tends to be prominent in Estonian literature, maintains a constant presence in her work. Soldiers come and go; war comes and goes. It leaves a strong impact, but behind it is a sense of humanity that endures despite every trial. A portrait of the author's father expresses this best: "My father didn't march with the Vapses.[2] He didn't march with anyone at all. My father healed people. Impartially, indiscriminately. Even in secret. Even taking risks." (p. 13)

In conclusion, I have to say that Pervik's *Vignettes from Memory's Depths* was one of the most fascinating Estonian books of 2020. It offers comfort and scope that loosen the tethers binding the present moment. It's wonderful to have such an elegant writer capable of observing her years so compellingly; and of stitching them into a seamless whole.

"Yet we truly always exist in our own time; increasingly so. Day after day, era after era." (p. 54) **SL**

2 *An anti-communist, anti-parliamentary political movement formed by veterans of the Estonian War of Independence (1929–1934).*

TRIINU LAAN

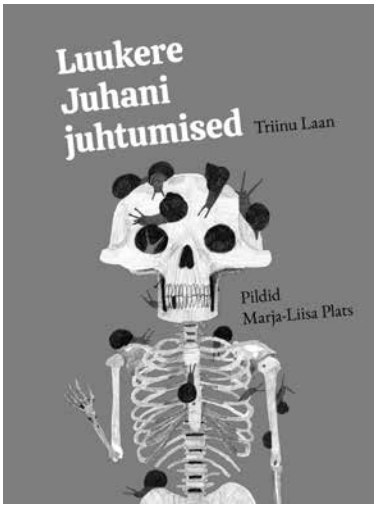
LUUKERE JUHANI JUHTUMISED
(JOHN THE SKELETON'S GOINGS-ON)

Illustrated by Marja-Liisa Plats
Päike ja Pilv, 2020, 62 pp.
ISBN 9789916951224

Triinu Laan stands out distinctly in Estonian children's literature. Hailing from the south of the country, her earlier works were written in both Estonian and Võro, a regional language, in parallel. Although her latest work is written solely in the former, the author makes no secret of her native language and home—Laan's characters live on a South Estonian farmstead and still converse in the local parlance.

The book's opening is straightforward: a skeleton model, used for school anatomy lessons, is sent into retirement. Gramps reckons the hardworking fellow has earned a proper break, and brings him home to live

TRIINU LAAN · ARCHIVE PHOTO



with Grams and their hen, rooster, dog, and cat. The couple's grandchildren often come to visit, too. Before long, Gramps is taking John the skeleton with him everywhere: trimming apple trees, reading bedtime stories, and listening to the ice sing on the lake. John is delighted, as are the old couple and their grandkids.

It is not only Laan's language, but her topics and treatment of the world that are unique. This isn't the first time she's probed the boundaries of children's literature, be it exploring the differences between how children and adults see the world around them or comparing humans and animals or life and death. Laan finds it obvious that people and other creatures, no matter how big or small, must all co-exist. It is something that all living beings have in common. We must provide space for others to live comfortably, be they a retired skeleton or snails oozing through the garden.

At the same time, the author does not see the realms of life and death as being clearly defined, but as fluidly transitioning categories. The farmstead is thus occupied by spiritual beings, too. Life and death are merely regarded as natural events. Death is something to be accepted; it and whatever follows are meant to be discussed. Laan's approach might even seem overly pragmatic and straightforward at times. Still, her perspective is far from callous or bleak—it is warm, sincere, lasting, and comforting.

Marja-Liisa Plats, who also grew up in the same area of Estonia, has done an incredible job illustrating the work. Collaboration between the artist and writer has produced a synesthetic whole that will spellbind tiny readers and observers, and even entrance adults. The palette includes cheerful and optimistic sunset pinks; and the elderly characters are full of vim and vigor. Not to mention the star of the work himself—John the skeleton, whose goings-on and richness of character are depicted with flair. **JP**

JUHANI PÜTTSEPP · PHOTO BY KRISTJAN TEEDEMA PM/ SCANPIX BALTICS

JUHANI PÜTTSEPP
ON KUU KUI KULDNE LAEV
(THE MOON'S A GOLDEN SHIP)

Illustrated by Gundega Muzikante
Kirjastus Tänapäev, 2020, 136 pp.
ISBN 9789949858866

Although more than 70 years have passed since the autumn of 1944 when masses of Estonians fled to Sweden from invading Soviet troops, the harrowing journeys have largely been overlooked or ignored in Estonian children's literature. Ilon Wikland touched upon the tragedy in her picture books, and it has been mentioned elsewhere in passing, but Püttsepp is the first author to truly hone his focus on those dark days.

The book's path, from concept to realization, wasn't easy. Inspired by his own family history, Püttsepp spent years combing through archive materials on the 1944 Estonian boat refugees, reviewing personal accounts by people who were children at the time, visiting sites where the boats landed, and talking to the locals who received them, including members of the Lotta Svärd. Gundega Muzikante, a renowned Latvian artist and illustrator, also has family ties to the boat refugees.

Eight-year-old Keete is the main character of the story. Her parents are both teachers who live in a cherry-red house in a small town by the sea. Five more children from other families live in the building: Rein, Riina, Reet, and Villu, whose father is away at war; and Jaan, who is raised by his uncle and grandmother after his parents were sent to the Gulag. Püttsepp describes the children's everyday lives in wartime: taking shelter from bombings, helping to make plans to escape, their treacherous voyage across the sea, the arrival in Sweden, and life in their first refugee camp.

Given that the subject matter is grim, the author provides a supportive framework for young readers in the very first pages: Keete is now an elderly woman sharing her memories with children at a school. Püttsepp vigorously draws readers deeper into the work by addressing them directly and inviting them to step into the young characters' shoes and sympathize. Taking today's youth by the hand, he guides them safely through

the complicated historical events—although such memories are difficult to recall, they are still important to remember. In doing so, the author has managed to tell the story in a thrilling, cinematic way.

Püttsepp's writing takes a sensitive and empathetic approach to ensure that old wounds can heal, and that terrible chapters of history do not inflict new ones; which is the sole path to overcoming societal rupture and moving forward together, as one. **JP**

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.

Recent translations

Danish

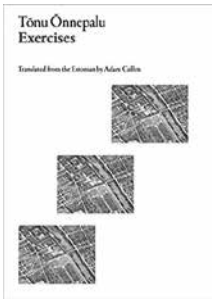
MEHIS HEINSAAR
Öösinine barett ja muud naljakad lood
Den natblå baret og andre spøjse historier
Translated by Birgita Bonde Hansen
Apuleius' Æsel, 2020

ANTI SAAR
Seisa siin, Pärt!
Bliv Her, Per!
Translated by Anja Andersen
Arkimedes, 2021

Dutch

ILMAR TASKA
Pobeda 1946
Pobeda 1946
Translated by Frans van Nes
Nobelman, 2020

English



TÕNU ÕNNEPALU
Harjutused
Exercises
Translated by Adam Cullen
Dalkey Archive Press, 2020

Finnish

JAAN KROSS
Maailma avastamine
Maailman löytäminen
Translated by Jouko Vanhanen
Ilmapress, 2020

MART KIVASTIK
Taevatrepp
Taivaan portaat
Translated by Anna Kyrö
Atrain & Nord, 2020

INDREK HARGLA
Apteeker Melchior ja Pilaatuse evangeelium
Apteekkari Melchior ja Pilatuksen evankeliumi
Translated by Jouko Vanhanen
INTO, 2021

French

ANDRUS KIVIRÄHK
Sirli, Siim ja saladused
Les Secrets
Translated by Jean-Pierre Minaudier
Le Tripode, 2020

ANDRUS KIVIRÄHK
Liblikas
Le Papillon
Translated by Jean Pascal Ollivry
Le Tripode, 2021

German

PAAVO MATSIN
Gogoli disko
Gogols Disko
Translated by Maximilian Murmann
Published by homunclulus, 2021

JOONAS SILDRE
Kahe heli vahel. Graafiline romaan Arvo Pärdist
Zwischen Zwei Tönen. Aus dem Leben des Arvo Pärt
Translated by Maximilian Murmann
Voland & Quist, 2021

KERTU SILLASTE
Kõige ilusam seelik
Der schönste Rock der Welt
Translated by Carsten Wilms
Kullerkupp, 2021

Greek

PAAVO MATSIN
Gogoli disko
Η ντίσκο του Γκόγκολ
Translated by Τέσυ Μπάιλα
Vakxikon, 2021

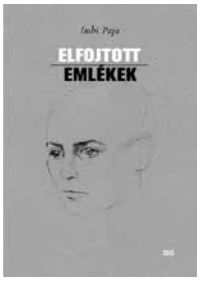
Hebrew

EDA AHI, ANDRUS KASEMAA, IGOR KOTJUH, KAUPO MEIEL, KRISTA OJASAAR, CAROLINA PIHELGAS, MAARJA PÄRTNA, KAUR RIISMAA, JÜRGEN ROOSTE, WIMBERG
סיריעצ סינוטסא. סיררושמ תפוסא תופפכו סיעבוכ.
Kova'im u-xfafot Asupat meshorerim estonim tse'irim
Translated by Rami Saari
Carmel Publishing House, 2021

Hungarian

ANDRUS KIVIRÄHK
Sinine sarvedega loom
Szépséges kék állat
Translated by Segesdi Móni
Gondolat Kiadó, 2021

IMBI PAJU
Tõrjutud mälestused
Elfojtott emlékek
Translated by Béla Jávorszky
Magyar Napló Kiadó, 2021



PIRET RAUD
Lugu Sandrist, Murist, tillukesest emmest ja nähtamatust Akslist
Segítség! Anyu összement!
Translated by Bence Patat
Cser Kiadó, 2021

Korean

TIA NAVI
Väike armastuse lugu
작은 사랑 이야기
Translated by Hong Yeonmi
Woongjin Junior / Woongjin Think Big, 2020

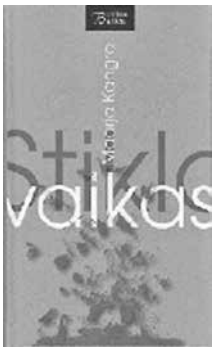
Latvian

ANDRUS KIVIRÄHK
Sinine sarvedega loom
Zilais, ragainais dzīvnieks
Translated by Maima Grīnberga
Latvijas Mediji, 2021

Lithuanian

JAAN KROSS
Kolme katku vahel. I, II
Lyno akrobatas. Tarp trijų maru. I, II
Translated by Danutė Sirijos Giraitė
Baltos Lankos, 2020

MAARJA KANGRO
Klaaslaps
Stiklo vaikas
Translated by Danutė Sirijos Giraitė
Homo Liber, 2020



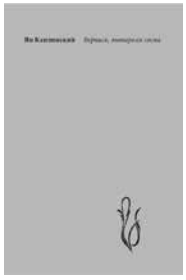
Polish

ANDRUS KIVIRÄHK
Mees, kes teadis ussisõnu
Człowiek, który znał mowę węży
Translated by Anna Michalczuk-Podlecki
Marpress, 2020

Russian

REELI REINAUS
Kuidas mu isa endale uue naise sai
Как папа новую жену искал
Translated by Vera Prohorova
KPD, 2021

JAAN KAPLINSKI
Tule tagasi helmemänd
Вернись, янтарная сосна
Translated by Jekaterina Velmezova
Aleksandra, 2021



Swedish

MATHURA
Käe all voogav joon
Linjen som flödar under handen
Translated by Pär Hansson & Peter Törnqvist
Black Island Books, 2021

Ukrainian

ILMAR TOMUSK
Hundi sõbrad
Друзі Вовчика
Translated by Irena Pavljuk
Staryi Lev / Видавництво Старого Лева, 2020

ARCHIVE PHOTO

The Years Go by in a Flash

The years go by in a flash,
only the days are sometimes slow.
Nights that arise between days like a dash
the long and wonderful fable do know.

Whoever has the sense to dream at night
and is bright, bushy-tailed in the day—
for him, work's as easy as pie, alright,
grown up or a child—either way.

Work is as easy as pie for his kind.
A job well done is a flower in hand.
At night, he rests his body and mind
while the blisters heal in that hand.

Life goes by so swiftly,
the child grows up before long,
the adult turns old very quickly,
and still, it's a comforting song.

Yet as the years fall away in a blur,
I've been troubled at times by the thought:
we should talk more often and never defer,
before it starts to get dark.

ELLEN NIIT
TRANSLATED BY ADAM CULLEN

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