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Contents

A women's self-esteem booster

by Aita Kivi

The Estonian writer and politician Maimu Berg (71) mesmerizes readers with her audacity in directly addressing some topics that are even seen as taboo.

As soon as Maimu entered the Estonian literary scene at the age of 42 with her dual novel *Writers. Standing Lone on the Hill* (*Kirjutajad. Seisab üksi mäe peal*, 1987), her writing felt exceptionally refreshing and somehow foreign. Reading the short stories and literary fairy tales in her prose collection *Bygones* (*On läinud*, 1991), it was clear – this author can capably flirt with open-mindedness! It was rare among Estonian authors at the time: female characters confessing their body complexes, analyzing their sexuality and aging, and admitting the existence of forbidden lusts and addictive relationships.

Self-irony is especially impactful when a story is conveyed in the first-person, and Maimu practices this regularly. She says that striptease is a piece of cake compared with the way a writer can emotionally expose him- or herself: "I've written poetry about the feelings or occurrences that I take from life, leaving the impression that I've personally gone through all of it."

Maimu tackled femininity and national identity in her novel *I Loved a Russian* (*Ma armastasin venelast*, 1994), which has been translated into five languages. Complex human relationships and the topic of homeland are central in her modernist novel *Away* (*Ära*, 1999). She has also psychoanalytically portrayed women's fears and desires in her prose collections *I, Fashion Journalist* (*Mina, moeajakirjanik*, 1996) and *Forgotten People* (*Unustatud inimesed*, 2007).

Beauty obligates

Maimu's earliest memory is the fear she felt when standing on a chair, alone, in a glass-ceilinged photography studio at the age of 18 months: it was the first time she was away from her mother. Growing up in a very Estonian-minded family [i.e. those who resisted the attempts at large-scale Russification – Trans.], the future author began reading at the early age of four, and writing at five. Back then, Estonian families generally read a lot at home, since the only forms of domestic entertainment available were reading and listening to the radio.

MAIMU BERG · PHOTO BY KALJU SUUR

Maimu's interest in Finnish literature began very early on, thanks to reading Aleksis Kivi's novel *Seven Brothers* (*Seitsemän veljestä*) cover-to-cover at the age of ten. Since she had a stay-at-home mother for several years (an unusual phenomenon in the ESSR), Berg received a plentiful amount of quality time: they went together to cafés, concerts, fashion studios… She also inherited her interest in music from her mother, and the pair sang opera duets at home.

In her books, Maimu has heavily addressed the topic of beauty and the pressure an attractive woman feels to be perfect in every sense. She acknowledges that beauty generally doesn't make things easier for a person: "At least in the case of my characters, it usually serves as an obstacle or causes problems."

Berg met her first husband, the charismatic psychiatrist Vaino Vahing, who later became a prosaist and dramaturg, while studying Estonian philology at the University of Tartu. To this day, stories are still told of the Vahings' literary parlor, the golden days of which crescendoed in the early 1970s. Every Tuesday night, Maimu and Vaino's apartment would be crowded with actors and intellectuals discussing theater, literature, and people. "We exchanged thoughts about things we'd read, keeping up a scholarly conversation. If someone had acquired any materials from abroad, then we'd listen attentively, but there was also just simple banter, too," Berg recalls.

Several major Estonian cultural personalities – Peeter Tulviste, Ingo Normet, Mati Unt, Hando Runnel, Jaan Kaplinski, Joel Sang, Juhan Viiding, Andres Ehin, Madis Kõiv, and Paul-Eerik Rummo – frequented the Vahings' parlor. Inevitably, a KGB informant or two would occasionally end up in the mix. Maimu was working at the University of Tartu Library

THREE MEDAL RECIPIENTS. MAIMU BERG, JULIA LAFFRANQUE, AND VAINO VAHING IN 2005.

ARCHIVE PHOTO

and acquired an extensive knowledge of literature: she possessed a wide array of interesting facts with which to surprise her guests.

A passion for the theater was another link connecting the legendary couple Maimu and Vaino Vahing. It was in their parlor that life was breathed into new developments in Tartu theater during the 1970s, and the pair attended performances at preeminent Russian theaters in the only metropolises accessible to them at the time: Moscow and Leningrad.

Maimu has also written her own plays: the Vilde Theater has staged her dramas *To Europe, To Europe* (which starred the couple's amateur actress daughter, now European Court of Human Rights Judge Julia Laffranque) and *Russian Roulette*. Several modern Finnish dramas have also been staged in Estonia thanks to Berg's translations, e.g. Jouko Turkka's *Connecting People*, Lea Klemola's *Kokkola*, and Reko Lundán's *Teillä ei ollut nimiä*. Her translation of the latter play earned her the 2008 Aleksander Kurtna Award. Besides more than a dozen plays, Maimu has translated into her native Estonian Päivi Setälä's books on the history of women's roles in the Middle Ages, antiquity, and the Renaissance; Martti Turtola's historical work on Estonia's President Konstantin Päts, as well as his *General Johan Laidoner and the Fall of the Republic of Estonia 1939–1940*; and Laila Hirvisaari's *I, Catherine* and *We, Empress*.

Boldly and busily

Estonians are well aware that the island of Saaremaa – the country's largest – yields tough, strong, busy women. Maimu's maternal roots also stretch to Saaremaa. One testament to her energy and vigor is the fact that when she received a little piece of ancestral Saaremaa coastal property through post-Soviet land reform, she decided to build a house there.

Maimu developed a close relationship with the world of beauty and fashion while working as an editor of the magazine *Siluett*. Her memoir *The Fashion House* (*Moemaja*) gives intimate details about the period. The publication's editors would buy relatively recent issues of foreign fashion magazines from second-hand stores, thus getting an idea of Western fashion trends. Soviet censors allowed the printing of foreign fashion collages in magazines, so the editors used

them to convey what styles were coming. While working at *Siluett*, Maimu also received her second degree, in journalism, from the University of Tartu.

Even though Maimu has written 13 books and is acclaimed both at home and abroad (her works have been translated into 11 languages), the author admits that she still feels like she ended up in literature by accident. One reason might be that she didn't remain a freelancer, but did salaried work. After leaving *Siluett*, Maimu worked as a department editor at the literary magazine *Keel ja kirjandus*, and was the founder and first editor-in-chief of the magazine *Elukiri*, which is aimed at an elderly readership.

For 20 years, Maimu also worked at the Finnish Institute in Estonia, mediating cultural exchange. This period helped to cultivate the author's close ties to the Finnish Writers' Union, and naturally marked the beginning of her efforts to familiarize Estonian readers with Finnish writers and literature. Berg was made an honorary member of the Finnish Writers' Union in 2010 and has received the Order of the White Rose of Finland, in addition to several literary awards. The Republic of Estonia has thanked her with the Order of the White Star, 5th Class.

Maimu was invited to join the world of politics mainly because of her bold opinion pieces. She has also published the collection of essays *Dancing with My Late Father: Observations of Estonian Life* (*Tants lahkunud isaga: vaateid Eesti ellu*, 2003). As a member of the Estonian Social Democratic Party, Berg has served as a Tallinn city councilor and a member of the Riigikogu (Estonian parliament). Having now left Estonian politics, Maimu asserts that life in Estonia is not easy for the elderly or large families.

Although Berg is retired, she still can't seem to find enough time for her own writing, since she remains busy translating and writing media-commissioned pieces. The author also spends a fair amount of time traveling, primarily with her husband, who is a Finnish writer, and to visit her grandchildren in Strasbourg. No doubt it is partly thanks to Maimu that the two boys are fluent in Estonian – as is their French father – despite living so far away.

Berg's most recent short-story collection, *Hitler in Mustjala* (*Hitler Mustjalas*, 2016), was nominated for the Cultural Endowment of Estonia's Award for Literature shortly after being published. It received the Friedebert Tuglas Short Story Award and the August Gailit Short Story Award.

In many of her works, Maimu Berg, who has ample opportunity to compare circumstances in her native country with those customary elsewhere in Europe, has focused on the fact that the elderly in Estonia are often shunned or self-isolated. Low self-esteem is often the culprit: *Oh, what good am I anymore…* Maimu splices self-confidence with wit, and through her writing and its deep sincerity, she endeavors to boost this self-confidence in many of her (female) readers. Hopefully, she will continue doing so in the future.

AITA KIVI (1954) is a writer and editor of the 93-year-old Estonian women's magazine *Eesti Naine*.

Tallinn University's new "Estonian Studies" master's program

by Piret Viires

Interest in Estonia has been growing around the world, and rising along with it is the number of those intrigued by the Estonian language and culture, or whose aim is to foster cultural or business ties with the country. It is with these individuals in mind that the Tallinn University School of Humanities, in cooperation with the Institute of Social Studies, has now established the Estonian Studies master's program. The program's curriculum is crafted for students whose native language is not Estonian, but who wish to study Estonia's language, culture, history, and social and political topics in the English language.

The globally unique Estonian Studies master's program provides students with a broad and interdisciplinary education, as well as an understanding of both Estonia's particularities and its ties to the greater world. One might even say that the program is a kind of representative Estonian state curriculum, the goal of which is to offer an academic education to anyone with a deeper interest in the country and its people.

The initial impulse for establishing the Estonian Studies program emerged seven years ago with a discussion on how to provide an academic master's-level education to translators of Estonian literature into foreign languages. The Estonian Literature Center and the then-rector of Tallinn University Rein Raud launched the idea. As time passed, the plan expanded, and we found that English-based academic knowledge of Estonia could be offered to a wider circle of enthusiasts. I'm pleased to announce that now this high-quality curriculum has finally been established.

The Estonian language and culture are taught in 30 universities around the world. Without a doubt, one target group for the Estonian Studies program is university students who have already engaged in similar studies elsewhere in the world, and who wish to deepen their knowledge of Estonia in the English language while simultaneously developing their Estonian-language skills. The curriculum is also suitable for students who are trained in another field but have

an interest in Estonian culture, history, and society, and who would like to speak Estonian at an intermediate level. Also welcome to join the program are individuals with an interest in Estonian literature, some proficiency in Estonian, and a strong desire to translate Estonian literature into their native languages in the future. The original impetus for launching the program, i.e. supporting the academic instruction of translators of Estonian literature, continues to be an important component. Students specializing in the translation of literature will have the opportunity to develop their practical translating skills over the course of their studies, and one part of the master's program will be the full translation of an Estonian literary work.

The Estonian Studies master's program will be conducted in cooperation with the Estonian Literature Center, the Estonian Institute, the Estonian Writers' Union, and the network of Estonian language teachers at foreign universities. Students may apply for a range of scholarships to support their studies, such as the Estonian Literature Center's scholarship for a student focused on the translation of Estonian literature.

Students who have completed the Estonian Studies program can expect to have attained a good grasp of the Estonian language (at least at the B1 level) and be highly knowledgeable of the country's culture, history, and society. The education will enable the individual to work in the fields of business, economics, diplomacy, cultural export, and the arts, either in Estonia itself or in the student's home country. Graduates will likewise have the necessary background to begin translating Estonian literature into foreign languages, and it is worth noting that foreign publishers' interest in Estonian literature has been steadily rising each year. Naturally, graduates may also continue studying in a doctoral program.

We hope that the Estonian Studies master's program will help to increase the number of Estonian experts and enthusiasts around the world. The coursework will help students forge a strong connection to the local culture, history, and social structure, thus making them Estonian cultural ambassadors around the world.

More information on the Tallinn University Estonian Studies master's program can be found at http://www.tlu.ee/en/School-of-Humanities/Estonian-Studies

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PIRET VIIRES (1963) is an Estonian literary scholar, a professor of Estonian literature at Tallinn University, and the head of the Estonian Studies master's program.

The pain threshold

An interview with the author Maarja Kangro

by Tiina Kirss

Several years ago already, Maarja Kangro began publishing bold, sometimes stylistically grating and riotous poetry and prose in Estonian. She is also a translator of Italian literature into Estonian, and is one of the first recipients of the state-sponsored writer's salary.

Kangro doesn't balk at using the word feminist, though she does reject labels – hanging them around her neck, but askew. In her novel *Klaaslaps* (*The Glass Child*, 2016), she approached places of pain in the first person: the beginning of life, the conditionality of having a child, and the loss of a budding life. What are the reaches of "scientific" power and theoretical thought? To what extent can they be offered by individuals with professional training in medical treatment and compassion? Charged with these questions from her own personal experience, Kangro purposefully walks the brink and travels deep into smoldering crisis, trying to perceive the meaning and value of life in places where it is tested more visibly than in other European countries that are seemingly at peace.

Your book *The Glass Child* bravely embarks on a journey through the most intimate of pains: the desire to have a child, multiple losses of said child, and the severity of grieving. Why did you choose this frank approach, which is even a shade tougher than physical and emotional nudity?

I suppose I'm the kind of person, for whom frankness doesn't require very much self-transcendence – at least in certain situations. With this book, I never thought even once that I was risking anything; the most difficult part about writing it was, maybe, finding the right tone. I was convinced that the topic needed to be unpacked, so for me, it was also a kind of missionary work. It's a hellacious experience that has happened to a lot more people than you'd think – quite many of them stay silent about it for fear of the stigmas, or at least don't discuss it openly. And the more repressed the experience is, the more awful the pain. In addition to the loss of future hopes and a new living being, the person can feel like she herself is incomplete; is to blame; is seen by nature as unworthy of reproduction. I looked for any historical literary works, in which the central topic is the loss of an unborn child

MAARJA KANGRO · PHOTO BY PIIA RUBER

CLASHES IN ODESSA, UKRAINE ON MAY 2, 2014 · PHOTOS BY MAARJA KANGRO

or a malformed child: there aren't many of them. In my book, I reference Oriana Fallaci and Kenzaburo Oe, though Mikhail Shishkin has also touched upon the issue with great empathy. There's not a whole lot of literature about it in Estonia. My aim was to show that you can discuss these things, and can do so quite frankly. The sharing of experience is one of humankind's most important survival strategies. I decided in favor of documentality and writing about real people so the text would be more salient and impactful. Writing was definitely a therapeutic undertaking as well; an opportunity to process the experience – although a large part of writing *is* word-therapy, in a way.

But at the same time, you also traveled a lot while the events were happening: to Spain, to a creative house in Italy, and even into the "smoldering crisis" in Ukraine. Anger and desperation lie within the traveler's daredevilness, but in several different places around the world, she also sits in a café, has a latte, and sends text messages. She is a curious but disturbed bystander.

What role did these trips play in shaping your book? What does travel mean to you more generally? What are the quandaries of travel for those, for whom a morning latte is (even self-evidently) affordable; not to mention the opportunity for taking frequent and spontaneous trips?

The urge to travel comes from a need for a change of scenery, as well as a wish to leave behind your old shell, your old identity, for a while. A new place where no one knows you and nothing is expected of you provides the opportunity to be a new person, whether even illusorily. And I'm the kind of person who really needs new impressional information; otherwise my mental "wheel" starts idling, and I get irritable and tired out. It's great to get away to Southern Europe for those dark, unpleasant winter months: Sicily, Andalusia...

In the book, I highlighted a foreign environment out of the desire to show different cultures' attitudes towards the topic. And with the events in Ukraine, I felt it'd be interesting to convey how a person allows herself to be swept along with "historic" events; to forget her own serious problems and anxieties while clutched by conflict-centric adrenaline. The Ukrainians are fighting for something; the protagonist is fighting for something, also.

I guess travel doesn't especially pose any quandaries for me. It's nice to be away and to become another person. When I was a young student, I was annoyed by some Westerners' uninformed attitudes towards Eastern Europeans. It hasn't angered me in a long time anymore, and on top of that, the level of general informedness has risen a little. Sometimes, I'm amazed that I still permanently reside in Estonia. But I suppose what I write is still directed towards Estonian readers first and foremost. An author should start writing in a foreign language or another environment very early on in order to become another culture's writer. Thomas Bernhard disparaged Austria, but was nevertheless an Austrian- and not even a German writer. Estonia's readership is definitely tiny in regard to certain genres – for instance, maybe a hundred people or so read more complex poetry. Even so, in a small cultural environment, you can be sure that there'll be *some* reaction, whether even an angry one.

On the one hand, people expect medicine (and also in vitro fertilization technology) to provide power and supremacy over (i.e. a breakthrough in terms of) "natural" boundaries; but in the book, you depict hospitals, doctors, nurses, and other medical workers cynically, showing their limitation and helplessness. The book's ending also stems from a medical worker's decision that shows very little reverence for life. What is needed in institutional medicine for employees to be able to cope with the crossing of threshholds; with situations, in which a person is a questionable, suffering, frail being?

Medical workers differ greatly, of course. There are those, who are extremely delicate and tactful; and there are those, who don't pay so much attention to psychological nuances and the slight shades between tones of speech. It's understandable that whereas a patient's huge trauma is a major event in his or her life, it's just one case among many

others of its kind for a medic. It's not even possible for them to fully relate to everyone – that'd be emotionally destructive. Leaving a medical worker's personal qualities aside (although they *are* of key importance!), it naturally tends to be the case that the more resources they have in terms of time and finances, the more they're able to pay attention to that "human" aspect; to reflect on things from another perspective. When medics are short on resources and time, then they don't have motivation for showing much humanity, either. Soviet-era medical treatment was generally pretty brutal (many of us can remember being chewed out by dentists, cleaners, and administrative ladies alike), and indifferent attitudes are also characteristic of countries and environments with poor economic situations and high levels of corruption.

Your writing is characterized by the portrayal of a "disobedient woman" who brazenly puts "ugly feelings" into words, in the philosophical sense. *The Glass Child* also speaks through the mouth of a "disobedient woman" about topics that are socially taboo, on the whole. Is one of art's social dimensions rooted in provocativity and the breaking of taboos? Is it a primary phenomenon for you, or rather a side-effect?

Provocation as an instigation to react, consider, and discuss is definitely a necessary social dimension of art. That does sound like something an old, idealist avant-gardist who believes in the influence of art would say. But I suppose I believe it a little, anyway. Although it's been difficult to create anything truly new in provocative art for a long time already, I don't underestimate provocation as a strategy. I certainly never write purely to provoke – that would be superficial; maybe even too, er, youthful. I haven't been that youthful since childhood – I've always got to have a more serious agenda, too, and simply acquiring an external reaction wouldn't satisfy me. But I'm unable to work for very long on anything that lacks a disturbing element and uncomfortable, maybe even shocking issues. Rather, it's somehow developed to where I've had the desire to delve into certain topics, and then seen that those topics or the way I handle them turns out to be startling in the broader sense; that they summon comments like "taboo-breaking", "provocative", or "audacious". That kind of a reaction isn't disappointing – on the contrary. It's always more pleasing to acquire a provocative tinge so easily; almost effortlessly. I've never tried to be a "disobedient woman"; I tend to see myself more in a modernist way. At least in prose, I'm an entirely earnest seeker of authentic expression!

In reality, breaking into new spaces or the attempt to do so is my raison d'être in art. That sounds idealist again. But I suppose I'm also able to enjoy art that's made entirely by conventions, or with explicit intentions to entertain.

How do you perceive the reception of your books?

I've no reason to complain. In fact, I should acknowledge that the reception has been very lively and positive – by critics, the media, as well as readers. I've received a lot of feedback and many letters from readers, several of which have been very in-depth: people have commented on what happens in the book, and have also gladly shared

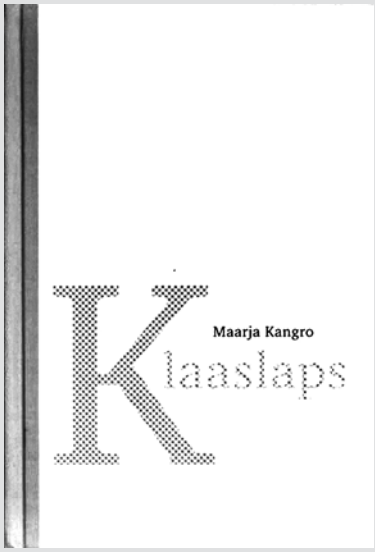
KANGRO AND THE PILLARS AT AGRIGENTO, 2016 · ARCHIVE PHOTO

events from their own lives. I'm pleased that the majority of reviews have addressed it as a fictional work, no matter that It's a documentary fiction. What's truly surprised me has been the fact that religious readers have handled the book so well, even though atheism is manifested in several places and there's even the Stephen Fry quote about God, over which he was taken to court in Ireland. But people are probably touched by the topic of the creation of new life. There's no denying that an author is truly delighted when she senses her work was almost expected. Getting first place on all sorts of critics' charts will make a vain writer chuckle, but you still have to say, "Oh, it's really nothing!" I might even be spoiled by that kind of welcomed reception. It's possible that I'll be disappointed if my next book isn't followed by so much attention and feedback. I'll think something went wrong!

TIINA KIRSS (b 1957) is an internationally-acclaimed literary scholar who has taught at the University of Tartu, Tallinn University, and the University of Toronto. Her leisure activities include knitting and spinning wool, as well as tai chi.

The Glass Child

by Maarja Kangro · Excerpt translated by Adam Cullen



THE GLASS CHILD BY MAARJA KANGRO

Wednesday, January 28th, 2015, ~3:00 PM

My throat hurt and felt swollen. At first, I thought I'd caught a cold from the open window, but then realized it must have been from the retching. Or maybe the Cytotec? Probably more the retching, from vomiting myself dry.

The nurse Margit reentered the room, stood next to my bed, and said: "I'm sorry for being so harsh with you. I've been told that I can get bossy before, too."

"It's fine."

"That's just the way I am. I've got a big family. You've got no choice but to be bossy in a big family."

"Mm-hmm. No worries."

"I really do apologize for being so short-tempered."

"Well, what can you do."

Perhaps I should've been grateful for her having turned my emotions to a frequency of anger and contempt at just the right moment.

The nurse left. I turned my bloody gown over this way and that, and looked at the pictures of the baby that I'd taken on my

phone. Jaanus was reclining on the other bed, also tapping away at his phone and checking e-mails. The Venice Biennale was coming up and Rebeka was writing incessantly. I'd promised to whip something up for Jaanus' piece, too; maybe some arias. Wouldn't you know it.

I had no inclination to do anything but look at the baby pictures; to repeat and relive her death over and over again—this most recent death, all kinds of death seen and encountered throughout life. Deaths that I have personally witnessed and physically touched, death notices that I've received at various points. *Wiederholungszwang*. It won't necessarily make you any wiser.

My baby looked much more adult than living three-to-four-year-old butterballs do. A peripheral little being. Humans are even more solemn-looking as fetuses than as newborn babies, although newborns are also somber peripheral figures in their quiet moments. From then on, the development goes further and further towards childishness.

The baby had her arm extended over her head in one picture, her thumb sticking out. It was almost like a little gesture.

But that cranium.

In Isaac Asimov's short story "The Ugly Little Boy", a nanny named Miss Fellowes gets so accustomed to the little Neanderthal boy she is raising that when she sees an ordinary boy on the street, the shape of his skull seems almost distasteful. The forehead that arcs forward and the jaw that juts out. My "little girl's" skull ended at her eyebrows and at her nape, as if someone had sliced it off with a knife. It shocked me anew every time I looked at it—one doesn't adjust to something like that as easily as to a Neanderthal skull. I looked. Again. And again.

Lacanians and Žižekians would use their own word for it. They'd say: The Thing. It's the awful Thing itself that I want to see. The hope of capturing the Real. Terrible, impossible *jouissance*.

And still, endlessly, I sought my truth with repetitive compulsion. Catastrophe, horror, awful misfortune: Look! Look again! Look and seek! Maybe, perhaps, nevertheless, I'll decipher something at some point—with a revelation, capturing an important detail? Maybe the baby's face will tell me what it's all about.

How else but by keeping a close eye on shock can you carve an opening, which will lead to meaning and the blueprint of the cosmos?

But then there was another myth that instructed one to avoid Medusa's gaze. That's exactly how Perseus managed to behead her: he saw a reflection of Medusa's face, but not her gaze itself. Calvino thought Perseus was a first-rate guy who knew how to live. And then there were those three monkeys, wise and imbecilic.

If you seek Medusa's gaze, you'll find it. If it exists somewhere, that gaze, then I've got to see it, too.

I looked over at Jaanus. He was so much younger than me. Good-hearted, meek. He was certainly doing all he could. What *can* one really do in this type of situation, anyway?

My experience was impossible to share. Or it wasn't. I myself don't support that discourse of inexpressibility, unspeakability, unformulability. But how to share it, then? How can you be certain it's been shared? What part of the experience is shareable?

"I actually didn't believe the placenta would be like that," I said. "Like hamburger meat."

"The doctor did say it could've looked nicer."

Oh, so that's how it is. It didn't even look nice enough, either. Still, I only replied: "I thought it'd be more like a cow pie, smoother-textured. I don't know why. I'd never actually seen a placenta before."

That was true. We had two female dogs when I was a kid, but I never got there in time when they had puppies. I don't know what happened to their placentas—will a house dog eat its own placenta? I remember the first one going berserk after giving birth and running off, disoriented. A malevolent demiurge doesn't make it any easier for other mammals.

"Some people eat placenta," Jaanus said.

"Yeah. But I think it should be cooked. They say consuming raw blood is bad for your stomach. That was the main thing they drilled into my sister when she had her tonsils removed. "Make sure you don't swallow your blood—your stomach won't take it.""

"But some people still eat it raw?"

"I suppose they do."

I googled "placenta eating" for a few minutes. It tossed several recipe webpages back at me. Placenta cookbooks, too: one even had a rosy-looking cover picture showing placenta with carrots and asparagus. Placenta lasagna. *Pasta Bolognese* with placenta.

Enough. My placenta had been taken away, what good was it anymore. I looked at my child again.

"You want to see the baby pictures?"

"No."

"You don't have the nerve?"

"I saw her for a second already."

I was pretty sure he hadn't. But whatever.

"I'm going to send them to Mac. I've got the guts to send them to her. She's one of the few people I'm confident won't be afraid of them. She's got the gumption to face the world's abject dimension.

Mac wasn't afraid of observing death, wounds, vomit, failure, rot, brokenness. I got the impression she'd never tied himself to the winners' side; to the side of those frantic people who count on triumph and must steer clear of abject, sludge, muck, and gruesomeness, just in case they seep into life's ordinary fibers. To those people, who shouldn't look straight at Medusa. Whose world is made up of the things that are viewed, and the things that are not. And so forth.

Oh, that superstition of decency and appropriateness: maybe it'll all be easy for me if I don't look! Maybe it will, but maybe it won't.

It's possible that Mac had become more compromising since her daughter's birth, of course… but she hadn't.

The first baby picture: her beautiful arms folded over her chest, her beautiful collarbone. A little finished person against a background of green medical fabric. *Share, via Google Mail, add file, add file, add file.*

What would happen if all artists, if all humans, dared to forge a connection with the abject ? Would the world be a better place? One without the denial of shit? Not everyone who dares to forge a connection with the abject , pain, and horror (or who are simply forced to do so) want to talk about it. What would happen if they did?

Some do.

I realize there's a degree of narcissism to this, too: in the display of the abject, an open wound, and trauma. Wasn't it

Narcissus who yelled: Oh, I've encountered pain, death, and shit; and now, I want you to take part in it, too! I'll douse you in blood and pus!

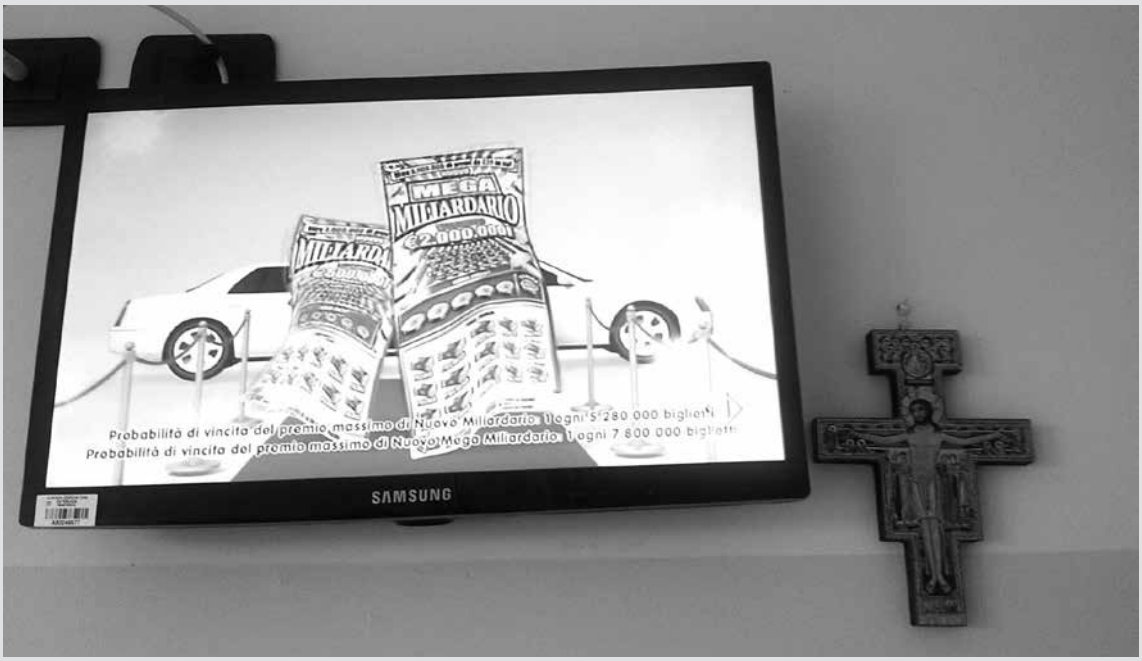
Naturalist honesty—of course you can recognize a few fragments of self-admiration in it. Fragments of an attention-addict's need for shock.

Is it more noble than mindless to write poetry about silence, all the same? To strive to capture death with handsome ellipses? To speak about trees when it entails remaining silent about so many abominations?

Don't we already know that even on the cover of a family magazine that shows daddy holding a teeny tot in the crook of his arm and everyone grinning so blissfully—yeah, don't we know that Death is who's really grinning back? That it's the chance of Death? And should that be spoken aloud? Why ruin it for those, for whom things are all going fine and dandy?

Oh, Narcissus, you don't want things to go smoothly for them, do you? You want to shove your bloody hand under their noses. Yeah.

By all means.



LOTTERY ON TV IN PERUGIA HOSPITAL, 2016 : PHOTO BY MAARJA KANGRO

Here I am now!

by Jürgen Rooste

Vladislav Koržets (1951) is a long-time celebrity Estonian writer and fisherman, whose poetry debut Songs or Such (*Laulud või nii*) appeared at long last in 2016. The collection immediately won the Cultural Endowment of Estonia's Award for Poetry, and rightfully so. But does Koržets view himself as a poet, too? He is a chef, restaurant owner, fisherman, humorist, and all-around artist and thinker… He has mainly written books about fish and fishing, but has also penned a children's book, a few film scripts and plays, lyrics, and jokes. On top of that, he is the editor of a comedy magazine and a fishing magazine. So, Koržets and I sat on the patio of his Kalambuur Café one late spring afternoon, and tried to figure these things out.

How is it that you came to publish your first poetry collection only now? You've always had ties to literature and people have always known that you're a poet, so it's strange to think that this is your first book of poetry… even many of your friends are poets. Why didn't you do it earlier?

There are many reasons. One is that I've been rather inept at putting books together over the years … as far as literature is concerned. I haven't assembled my short stories to this day. My whole life, I've felt that putting a book together isn't important at all. What's important is what I'm going to write today or tomorrow. Finished work and its exhibition somewhere haven't appealed to me.

Another reason is probably that, just like many other people, I began trying out literature with poems: the sort of gloomy, melancholy poems of youth that are brimming with ache, just like it is for… kids in late puberty?

Does puberty ever really end for a poet?

Not necessarily. Speaking on my own behalf, I've had the gumption to say that I went straight from puberty into a mid-life crisis, into, to a certain extent, an attitude towards life that was even irresponsible and failed to appreciate certain values, that looked past some values, which might've even included traditional things like work, family, home, and what all… although I was both a work and family person. But those are all just slightly secondary at some point. That's the curse of being a writer: you start regarding your creativity and work as the most important things in the world. I got over that relatively quickly, thankfully. It was all somewhat clear by sometime in my 30s. I started being able to distinguish between myself and my creative works.

VLADISLAV KORŽETS · PHOTO BY PIIA RUBER

Those are two separate things that shouldn't be mixed.

I'm still struggling with that.

It's sort of an inner thing, oftentimes… After a certain point, I didn't write poems anymore, of course. That was also because I happened to exist in the same generation, in the same time, as some very strong poetic personalities. The Juhan Viiding/Jüri Üdi phenomenon was strong and outstanding back then, and he tended to overshadow others, naturally. I'm not talking only about myself, but about several other wonderful, talented writers of that generation. By the way, it's worth noting that Üdi/Viiding also took things from them; he took things from me: just like any proper writer, he had sort of a thief's ear. Which I can't blame him for. At the same time, the liveliness and strength of his personality, as well as the way he used literary devices influenced everyone, including me.

So, when I – as a young, twenty-or-so-year-old man – first tried publishing my poems, I didn't get very far. Back then, publishing was troublesome in general and there weren't many opportunities – just a few magazines you could count on one hand, the ones that people read, ones it was worth submitting your stuff to where there'd be any prestige. I suppose I hadn't developed my own poetic language or posture yet, either. I was crouching, searching for myself, writing free verse to a certain extent: very associative and emotional poetry. And I wrote quite a lot, and there's very little of it left, because generally it all went into the fireplace.

If you want to run well, then you've got to run with the best. Is it the same rule in poetry, or do talents suffocate one another, as you say?

Toomas Kall[1] put it really well when I received the award for my book recently: "Think of how good it is that you didn't compile your first collection at the age of 17 or 18 – you'd be awfully embarrassed today!" There's a grain of truth in that. It might indeed be a good thing that I wasn't able to start regarding myself as a substantial poet. I took the path where doors opened for me. And they opened in the field of comedy writing. They opened very smoothly, and all on their own. What was the point of me breaking through a closed door? And poetry was somewhat of a closed door for me.

I opened other doors, too: dramaturgy, radio dramas, scriptwriting, short stories: I've tried writing something longer as well, but it hasn't worked out yet. Maybe I don't have the pluck for it or the maturity or… I took breaks from plays by writing children's stories. Or vice versa. And I still wrote a few occasional poems.

For a while, I used my poetic abilities to write parodic and travesty-style odes that have never been published. I performed them live, but their content makes them unfit to print.

Do you still have them?

I do. They weren't suitable for *Songs and Such:* I wrote them with a different kind of sense and purpose. They're too doggerel-ish, though they are in ode form. "An Ode to the Soviet Circus", "An Ode to the Falling

1 An Estonian dramaturg, humorist, and journalist – JR

Night". I even wrote them to order, opened up my own ode workshop. They're basically humoresques in verse.

Every good poet should be a little bit of a humorist: otherwise, it's just a halo dangling over a void, holy light drowning out the poetry…

It's understandable that humor is a method of survival. Since we're given a fear of mortality to bear from birth, then we're given a sense of humor to balance it out. It's a strange combination. If you don't have a sense of humor, then that fear of mortality and the solemnity of the world will suffocate you.

You tend to apologize for your poems a little: *Songs or Such*…

True. And wholly on purpose. I'm set apart from contemporary poetry's mainstream, almost with a school-like poetic method, with a schoolkid's strict pursuit of rhyme and structure. I respect the good poets – ranging from Talvik to Alliksaar, Runnel, and Rummo – and when I read their poetry, I've just got to say "…or such" about myself.

I'm not burdened by the weight of being a poet. My very good late friend Ott Arder said a poet never works, but a poet is always working. The role of being a poet is also a burden.

But Koržets' "role" exists, also: you're a media figure and have created a kind of poetic ego. You've got to have that protective layer sometimes.

Unfortunately so, but several years ago I realized that in order to reach one's true self, you sometimes have to let go of yourself, and by that I mean those very roles, classifications, iconizing; otherwise, the roles will kill you. That's why I fiercely rejected my role as a humorist once, discontinuing it and ceasing to perform. At one point, I gave up my fishing magazine. I've had other disavowals, and hopefully, there'll be more. In order for the image of my ego to stay clear, I've got to occasionally wipe away what exists.

What's it like to melt into someone else's skin while writing?

Writing really can be done in many different ways: whether deeply as yourself, or playing some role, transforming into someone else. That's how I wrote the lyrics for the film *Farts of Fury*[2], where I was even given the song titles in advance: "Pig and Cuckoo" and "Steppenwolf's Howl"! Those were really enjoyable to write.

That's great; those songs were the best part of the film!

There was another song in it, the idea for which I had earlier: "Slaves of Freedom". It's a thought, an image, which describes many of my good friends. The fear of life or of an activity is draped in it: wanting to be free under any circumstances… And then, you're made a slave to your freedom: that's how it is with lots of people. No obligations or anything, and real life just starts to flow past.

2 Kormoranid ehk nahkpükse ei pesta, *2011 – an Estonian film about aging rock stars. – JR*

Maybe the reason why I waited so long with this book is that I was waiting to be mature. I matured so slowly; maybe now, I'm mature enough that what I have to say somehow concerns others as well.

Maturity, ripening, is a culinary process… how do you as a connoisseur view today's life through food imagery? Hipsters are all going vegetarian, the world has changed, ethics have been made a part of food culture, and for some, it's awful to think that you, an old fisherman, rip out fish guts.

Well, those are meta-problems. I can still remember the turbulent transitional period of the 80s and 90s: it was a very difficult time to get by, to survive, since petrol and food were in short supply. And then, you read in the newspaper about how animal protectionists were fighting fur-wearers in Sweden. I could tell clearly that it was a pseudo-problem. Good welfare turned people into idiots: I've got a poem that ends like that, too. When someone lacks difficult problems, then he'll come up with them on his own. But the fact that those problems exist today… they've actually been around this whole time. We still are living mentally in the Middle Ages, for the most part. And it's getting even more Middle-Aged in some respects, especially for people who lack direct, daily contact with nature, who lack an ancient reality, a primary existence. The world we occupy, urban space is secondary. There's human-made culture, human-made problems, and all kinds of urban work that includes virtual space. There's hardly any contact with that which is bigger and mightier than we are: with the thing called nature. And then there's hardly any of that particular wisdom, either. That's when people start thinking that killing a fish is cruel. Ah, how cruel *nature* is!

In our culture, at least, people have a strong desire to be right, to be more right than others: about nutrition, for example. And the lack of education is also a problem: the scarcity of classic, systematic education. If a person hasn't had to exercise his brain, if he's worked thoroughly through some philosophical systems and then put them aside, then he lacks critical training. He's dumber than Descartes, who said to doubt everything. Then, he might fall into the clutches of almost any kind of seemingly scientific conception. Scientific nature is like a flag or a breaker: we use it without understanding what science really is, and how little it actually knows.

How do you view contemporary poetry, Estonian poetry? Is it also a kind of degenerate part of secondary urban culture?

That's hard to answer. I'm not very up to date on, or *in* the scene. But you're right: these days, people talk about a thing called prose poetry, which for me, isn't actual poetry anymore. I believe that one may write those kinds of pieces, but for me, it's disrespecting poetry. I've written a few myself as well, and have even used that kind of language in my humoresques. Break the words up into short lines, and you've got poetry. There was a fierce struggle going on for free verse during my younger days; for giving it the right to live. I can't help being enchanted by stricter form. Unfortunately, I have to admit that those ancient talents who are on a par with Viiding – especially the ones who sprout from urban culture – appear relatively rarely. Not that they really

can, of course; even if there are just a few over the course of a century, then that's already great for a little country like Estonia.

I accept and respect people who strive to find themselves through words, i.e. poetry as a journey of self-discovery, as a path to something. But for my experience of myself, to also touch others: does that ever happen? Speaking from personal experience, I can say that becoming simple isn't very simple. It's scary to be simple, and scary to be genuine, too, you know. We elevate genuineness to a motto, saying we've got to be sincere and all, but we're afraid. It's like everything else in the world: 80–90% of everything that's done is junk, and it won't stand the test of time. Are my poems junk, too? I don't know. I'm not troubled by whether I'll still be read or not in a hundred years. Seeing as how most of what's written disappears, I should be thankful that I'm able to arrive at something within myself through poems and meter… to arrive at recognition. I feel like meter is meant to bind messy thoughts together – to try to attain some clarity out of the mess that everyone possesses.

Is it worse to place chaos in a mold of chaos? Its structuring is intellectual work, isn't it?

One thing that I've craved is a sort of chill state of mind. I haven't been able to word it differently: chill.

Have you experienced it?

Yes, sometimes.

Has it happened more while writing poetry or fishing, or while standing at the stove?

It's happened in a variety of different mental states and situations, but yes, I've also occasionally reached that kind of chill and lightness – that perception – while writing poetry. The world becomes somehow lucid and dear to me at some point, and it feels good to be a part of it.

A few days ago, I realized that it's possible to express very precisely in Estonian all those "modern" teachings – presence and the here-and-now – that are important for perceiving what's around you. Tibetan Buddhism and meditation methods and the like. It's ridiculously easy to say in Estonian, in four words; we've got the mantra: *Siin ma nüüd olen!*[3] The question is whether I myself am here, too, or am I floating and wandering through all those issues? I'd like to be here!

JÜRGEN ROOSTE (1979) is a poet, journalist, and one of the most renowned writers of his generation. He has published fifteen collections of poetry and received the Cultural Endowment of Estonia's Award for Poetry on two occasions, in addition to many other literary awards.

3 *Here I am now!*

Cycle

The night before last Wednesday,
my pup died of infection,
and was laid to rest out back
until the resurrection.

He won't be poking his snout
into my palm anymore,
nor will his bushy tail slap my leg
enough to make it sore.

The old beast was finally freed
from the strife life will relay,
and I've been drinking vodka
ever since that one Wednesday.

That animal's why I drink,
drinking animal-like myself,
and I fetch more all alone
from the village grocer's shelf.

Can't drag myself much further,
as my legs move ever so weakly.
Dull pain gnaws at my soul,
my pancreas and kidneys.

Even so, this nasty cycle
in a way is sort of fun.
Just like that one fall season
when we had to bury Mum.

1996

***SONGS OR SUCH* BY VLADISLAV KORŽETS**

Freedom

With respect to my unconceived, unborn,
and unregistered children's
right to unbeing

The freedom to be free,
the freedom to be a slave,
the freedom to plod along
in mud and on parquet.

The freedom to nail tablets
right up upon the walls,
the freedom to seek myself
by touch, though I might fall.

The freedom from or for hate,
the freedom from or for joy;
for words to become flesh and weight,
and flesh consumed, destroyed.

The freedom to be nice,
and for its absence to be
present in flesh and in word.
And lastly, freedom to notbe.

Translated by Adam Cullen

The signs of something going right

Adam Cullen (31) is a translator and poet from Minnesota. He first came to Estonia in 2006, somewhat incidentally and with his sights set merely on travel. Nevertheless, he was mesmerized by the local language, and moved to Estonia the very next year. Now, in less than a decade, he has become a prolific translator of Estonian literature into English. And he's just getting started! Cullen is certainly one of the most valuable ambassadors of Estonian literature to the world – a title he himself never flaunts, of course. He is a humble and hard-working littérateur who plays the violin, sings in an Estonian mixed choir, battles hazelnut trees encroaching upon his coastal summer home, and is continually mindful of taking the time to breathe.

First things first – what is your first vivid memory of Estonia?

I first arrived here on a foggy, gloomy day. The weather wasn't even nice… which I suppose didn't give me any false expectations! I can still remember the view from my hotel window – Tallinn's skyline was different back then. But at the initial moment I heard the Estonian language, everything was already decided for me, on some level. The language felt like an open door. I moved here the next year, and started learning Estonian through immersion. Still, I really had no idea I'd become an Estonian translator, it just happened somehow. I met Ilvi Liive and Kerti Tergem from the Estonian Literature Center at a Finno-Ugric nonprofit organization's Christmas party, and that's how it all began.

I don't have a degree in literature, as most translators do. I did, however, graduate from university in Global Studies (however that can be explained!) and in Russian language and culture.

At first, I joked that the reason I started translating Estonian was that I was trying to make a career out of obscurity. And that was true, in a way; but then again, it wasn't at all, because it's something that utterly fascinates me to this day. I can talk about it for hours, and can bore you to death with how incredible I find the Estonian language.

Although you're a fluent Estonian speaker, we're conducting this interview in English. You've also lived in Russia and speak Russian fluently. How do you define or see yourself

LICHEN / SAMBLIK BY ADAM CULLEN

ADAM CULLEN · PHOTO BY DMITRI KOTJUH

within these different languages and cultures?

I suppose I do have a slightly different personality and identity in different languages. My Minnesotan side is different from my Estonian side, for sure. My Estonian ego is probably more reserved, because language inherently contains culture, and to practice a language, you have to participate in the culture. My Russian personality is very intense, so it's great that I found Estonia and can nurture this calm Nordic side of my identity. If I were living Russia and working as a Russian translator, then it'd be a very different life. I do love Russian humor and culture, and all the warmth that lies behind it. Not to say that Estonian lacks that, it's just very different.

I actually do still have a hard time putting certain things into words when it comes to Estonia and Estonians – and this after almost a decade of living here. For me, It's as elusive as speaking English with an Estonian accent. I can do a Finnish accent, and I can do a Russian accent, no problem, but I just can't seem to put my finger on the Estonian one! It's like the legend of the Old Man of Lake Ülemiste, *Ülemiste vanake* – if the building of Tallinn is ever finished, *Ülemiste vanake* will rise up and flood it. If I ever get an Estonian accent down in English, then I guess it'll be the end of my time here.

There is one recurring question that I find a bit baffling – people still ask me: "So, you think you're gonna stay here?" And that after ten years! It must have to do with some deep-rooted psychological elements that I can't explain. Something about the Estonian psyche.

So, the author's voice vs. the translator's voice – how would you describe the relationship between the two?

I really enjoy how Estonia is beautifully small and quaint enough that you can speak to living authors and get to know them well. Many of the authors I've translated are now friends, and thanks to this, I feel like I'm in a way more competent when expressing their voice; that I have their trust and can avoid false attributions.

It'd be a whole different story if I were only able to research the author online, scrolling through whatever's on Wikipedia, thinking, "Oh, that's what they must be like." The conclusions you draw about the author and about who they are in real life are very different, as is trying to commit that into character voices or the structure of their language. But by having this personal knowledge and these interactions, it *is* acting, in a way – a sort of character study. You get to be around them and see how they react in new situations and their different patterns, but at the same time, they might do just what you'd expect. I suppose the greatest compliment a translator can get from an author is when they say: "I feel like I wrote this in this language myself. Channeled through you."

Still, I think it's impossible for a translator to completely disappear from a text. Every translator retains his or her own faint style: we're not removable from what we write, but at the same time, it's possible to strike a balance. A kind of harmony. I think that's the sign that something's going right.

Your own literary debut, the bilingual poetry collection *Samblik / Lichen*, was published early this year. So, what's the story behind your own writing? Did you always know it was going to happen one day?

No, I had absolutely no idea. It was as unexpected as was becoming a translator in its own time. I'd been translating poetry for quite a while, but really never wrote any myself. But then, I went through a very difficult time in my personal life, and I guess I needed to get those emotions out somehow – so I put them on paper, which is a safe place. Of course, I don't just write about horrible, dark things. But it turns out your inner levels of cliché will always keep surprising you, I guess!

I'm really pleased that my book is between covers now, and is out living its own life. In a way, I see it like a time capsule – it has poems that preserve the truth about the moment in which they were written, but those are gone now. I haven't pushed them away or anything; they just walked off so that newer ones can have room to enter.

I actually read more newer poems at the book release, not just ones in the collection – people can read those on their own. At the same time, I do feel it's worth seeing poetry performed by the actual poet – in its true living colors, with all their preferred pauses and emphases. I think that's the most genuine expression of poetry after it's written – performance.

But the written word itself is a great way to gain perspective of the possibility of change. You can see how you've developed or transformed when you go back to it later on. That also goes for translation – when something I translated in the past isn't exactly to my liking now, I still know that that *was* me back then. It's truth.

What is your work process like? Do you have any special habits?

I prefer working outside – I "set up" my office outdoors whenever I can. And sometimes I'll translate by hand, though not very often, because I'm usually under a lot of deadline pressure and it takes more time. But I do like translating poetry by hand, especially since it allows you to be so much more intimate with the text. And you put

more thought into writing when you do it manually, in general – even if there are a ton of cross-outs, or especially so! I do my own writing by hand as well. I've always got a notebook with me. Sometimes, I'll just write little snippets; other times, a whole poem, either of which I'll digitalize later and then expand or polish. Sometimes, that physical form is the end of the road for them. I like working and writing in the evening, for the most part – that's when my brain actually starts waking up and operating at a decent capacity.

How do you handle the intensity of being one of the few people who do what you do?

Well, hopefully I'll scrape enough money together someday to build a little sauna out in the woods in western Estonia. And I would like to have more of an opportunity to travel, though it's hard making dreams like that come true as a freelance translator of Estonian lit! Still, I'm generally content with the way things are – I'm not too needy.

I do get a little worn out by the insane tempo life's taken these days – everything is always a rush. I doubt it'll ever regress again, but it's important to find ways to separate yourself from work or passion, if only for a few hours. Being capable of doing something or being good at it doesn't mean you have to do it frenetically or work yourself to death. It's all about creating a balance. One comics artist compared it to breathing – when you create art or do anything productive, you're breathing out. Still, you can't breathe out endlessly. Breathing in means experiencing other art, doing other things, or even just doing nothing. And you can't judge yourself for taking the time to breathe in – it's essential for you to breathe out again, not a weakness. Depending on the situation, it's good to not try to answer every e-mail immediately or agree to do things overnight or on weekends, even (or especially) as a freelancer. That way, people get accustomed to the fact that you as a person need to breathe out, and hopefully, it'll give them a chance to do the same. **ELM**

"BREATHE" · PHOTO BY ADAM CULLEN

Siuru in the winds of freedom

by Elle-Mari Talivee

Siuru, a literary group of the utmost importance in Estonia's cultural context, was founded in May 1917. It was the second-to-last year of World War I, bringing pivotal events that included the abdication of Tsar Nicholas II and Estonia achieving extensive autonomy from the Russian Empire: a hint of freedom was in the air. Political exiles of the 1905 Russian Revolution were allowed to return home. The original members of Siuru were Friedebert Tuglas, Henrik Visnapuu, August Gailit, Marie Under, and Artur Adson. Johannes Semper joined later that summer. Tuglas was already a well-known author, while the others had yet to make names for themselves in Estonian literature.

What kind of a group was Siuru, which emerged in the spirit of European modernity? It was bold, free, spirited, erotic, and poetic: "writing that extended from the unusually sensual to the roughly scandalous". Most importantly, the group constituted a core that drew into its orbit a community of writers, artists, and actors, and also laid the foundations for a publishing firm that released Siuru's own poetry collections and close to twenty-five other books. They called themselves the Six (White) Chrysanthemums.

Siuru's only female member, **Marie Under** (1883–1980), was made the group's chair*man* (the irony of this gender-specific title was not unintentional). The writers had nicknames for one another, and Under was their "Princess". Her debut poetry collection was published in the first year of Siuru's existence, and its passionate and shocking romantic sonnets became so popular that a second printing was needed by the end of 1917.

Artur Adson (1889–1977), who was Under's smitten admirer and future husband, performed the duties of Siuru manager and "the Princess's Page". His poetic self emerged amid the group's literary fervor, writing in his own native South Estonian dialect.

Where there is a Princess, there must also be a Prince: this nickname belonged to **Friedebert Tuglas** (1886–1971), who had returned to Estonia after 11 years of exile in Europe, and was also called "Felix" after his

LITERARY GROUP SIURU IN 1917. FROM LEFT: AUGUST GAILIT, HENRIK VISNAPUU, JOHANNES SEMPER, ARTUR ADSON, MARIE UNDER, AND FRIEDEBERT TUGLAS

ARCHIVE PHOTO OF THE UNDER AND TUGLAS LITERATURE CENTRE

novel *Felix Ormusson*. Tuglas is considered the "grand old man" of Estonian short-story writing, but when he was still at the height of his youth, he penned the celebrated kaleidoscopic novella *Maailma lõpus* (*At the End of the World*, 1915), which tells of a young man who falls in love with a giant-woman.

Henrik Visnapuu (1899–1951; a.k.a. "Prince Visna") and **August Gailit** (1891–1960; a.k.a. "Ge") were a vital creative duo who tirelessly invented new bohemian tricks. Visnapuu described his friend Gailit as being a remarkably tall man who would laugh with overbearing mirth in cafés and had only then – as Siuru formed – vowed to someday become a writer: his debut in 1910 hadn't been a memorable one. Hidden beneath Gailit's laughter and jocosity, broad intellect and gentlemanly demeanor was a gentle soul. Born in metropolitan Riga, he was a true dandy. All of Siuru's other members, with the exception of Under, hailed from south Estonia, but Gailit himself was an impressive mixture of Estonian, Latvian, and Livonian heritage. He lived in Riga from 1911–1916, worked as a journalist, and was a correspondent for Latvian, Estonian, and Russian newspapers during World War I. Gailit would read aloud the stories assembled in his collection *Saatana karussell* (Satan's Carousel, 1917) to his fellow Siuru members, filling them with the conviction that the author of those fantastic tales would one day be a literary great.

Henrik Visnapuu's collection *Amores* was also published by Siuru in 1917. The fiery love poems left Tuglas with no doubt when he wrote his review: "He is a born poet; his path is preordained, be that good or bad…" Even today, Visnapuu's later romantic poetry is unsurpassed. He recalls the strong influences of three women in his memoirs:

THE SIURU ANGEL · ARCHIVE OF UTLC

Marie Under, Isadora Duncan, and Ella Ilbak. The latter, Estonia's first professional female dancer, likewise attended Siuru gatherings.

Johannes Semper (1892–1970) joined Siuru shortly later and was nicknamed "Asm" – a reference to the German author Otto Ernst's novel *Asmus Sempers Jugendland* (which appeared in Estonian translation in 1912). Semper's first poetry collection, *Pierrot,* was published in 1917, and stylistically complemented the poetic renewal that was underway.

Each member of Siuru somehow altered the language and nature of Estonian literature. The spirit of their endeavors is indirectly referenced in the group's name: "Siuru" was a mythical fire-bird in the Estonian national epic *Kalevipoeg*. Yet with their puckish attitudes, they also altered the image of the writer into a collaborative member of a social circle that holidays together, performs together, and co-organizes bohemian events for the release of their works. They even devised a highly unconventional plan to occupy a tower along Tallinn's medieval wall: both for its romanticism and to house club activities. Nevertheless, the grand idea remained a mere castle in the sky, as they lacked the financial resources for renovations.

In September 1917, a truly bohemian affair was held at the Estonia Theater in Tallinn: a literary evening complete with lotteries to support the publishing of Siuru members' works. The profits were used to establish Siuru's base capital. Artur Adson wrote that Gailit and Visnapuu planned to "usher in the evening with a true carnival by speeding through the city streets in trucks, dressed as Pierrots, Harlequins, and other costumed heroes, throwing flowers, playing music, and other gaieties." Although that part of the evening was canceled, the frolicsomeness was still pulled off through lottery prizes, which included a rendezvous with an actress, a kiss from a poetess, and fifteen minutes of a writer at the winner's service.

Siuru often met in cafés. Visnapuu recalled that there was a table for twelve permanently reserved for Siuru members and friends at the Tallinn café "Linden", with a flag bearing the group's angel logo in the center. One part of café life was composing frivolous postcards for members and friends who were traveling, with everyone present adding short, witty contributions. The café atmosphere was well-suited to both creative work and merrymaking. Once, an intense bohemian pub fight even broke out in a Tartu establishment: when a coupletist decided to poke fun at Siuru onstage, baked rutabagas and raw eggs (which some had had the foresight to bring) began to fly. Unfortunately, other patrons also joined in the brouhaha and a fistfight broke out between the bohemians and the bourgeoisie. This made the establishment very popular for a while among customers hoping to witness a similar conflict.

MARIE UNDER IN 1917

PHOTO BY PARIKAS · ARCHIVES OF THE UNDER AND TUGLAS LITERATURE CENTRE

VIEW FROM SIURU'S TOWER OVER PIKK JALG STREET · ARCHIVE PHOTO OF UTLC

Siuru members vacationed together, and often performed together as well. A romance between Marie Under and Friedebert Tuglas unfolded in Siuru's first year, making both writers' works shine with particular brilliance during the period, and leaving behind some of Estonian literary history's most beautiful love letters: "How could I sleep when I love you so?"

Siuru's twilight fell at the beginning of the Estonian War of Independence, in the fall of 1918. Visnapuu and Gailit went to the front lines, where they were war correspondents.

In Siuru's later works, the group's utopian spirit of liberty is perhaps best embodied by the eponymous main character of Gailit's magnificent novel *Toomas Nipernaat* (1928). Nipernaat is a man who leaves home every spring to roam the land freely all summer. His warm months are filled with adventures, fairy tales, and love stories. Although he may appear careless, fleeing when someone's heart has been broken, the eternal wanderer leaves a gentle and lasting impression on his own soul, and of those he leaves behind. Gailit was the most widely translated and internationally renowned Estonian writer in the years 1930–1940. *Toomas Nipernaat* has been translated into nine languages, and will hit an even ten when it is published in English next year.

ELLE-MARI TALIVEE (1974) 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.

Fear and loathing in little villages

by Mari Klein

Over the last few years, the writers Birk Rohelend and Katrin Pauts have set out to enrich the Estonian crime genre with grim, trying tales set in otherwise idyllic small communities. Both women started out writing crime-novel series, and have received notable recognition for their works. Rohelend's and Pauts' growing popularity shows that the contemporary Estonian crime genre truly is starting to thrive and acquire its own unique visage.

Birk Rohelend (b 1981) is already a relatively well-known author in Estonia. Her debut novel *I, Mortimer* (*Mina, Mortimer*) was published in 2007. At the time, the book, which explores the mental worlds of grieving youth, was refreshing in the context of Estonia's literary scene, and was also awarded in a competition for youth literature. Rohelend (who is a genetic technician by education and currently works as a communications expert) has undergone several different stages in her writing since her debut, and has tried out multiple genres, also writing scripts for popular television series, prose, and poetry. The first volume of her Silva Stökel crime series, *You Have to Kiss Silva* (*Sa pead suudlema Silvat*), was published in late 2016 and immediately had positive public reception.

The events of the novel commence on an evening when the protagonist, Silva Stökel, a journalist and the mother of a small boy, almost gets into a car accident due to exhaustion from insomnia. She is haunted by the feeling that the woman she nearly runs over is none other than her childhood friend Helena, a girl who disappeared without a trace twenty years earlier. When Silva starts following her friend's trail, it quickly becomes clear that the disappearance is far from the only bloody and horrifying secret concealed in the seemingly quiet and peaceful town of Omavere (a name that translates to "own blood" in Estonian). Silva's exceptionally tense, thrilling quest for both herself and the truth starts to blur the line between dreams and reality, exacerbated by the woman's fatigue from raising an autistic child.

Commenting on the impetus for writing the novel, Rohelend has said: "Since I'm personally a very big fan of the crime genre, I've

BIRK ROHELEND · PHOTO BY PILLE-RIIN LARM

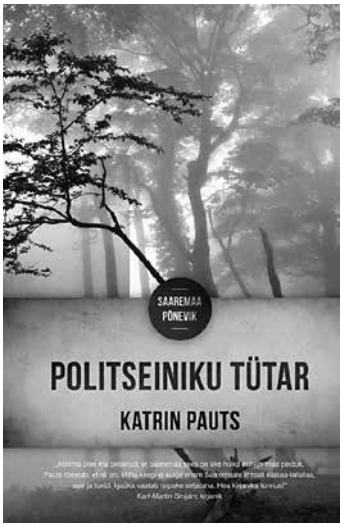
sometimes been bothered over the years by its artificial simplicity, as if the detective him- or herself doesn't have any personal issues." She's also said that her work in TV scriptwriting has been a great benefit in refining her plot structures: the experience doubtless helped her to craft this multi-layered work, in which tension isn't relieved for a single moment, and several different plot strands are active at once.

You Have to Kiss Silva possesses undeniable elements of "Nordic noir", and thus offers readers the joys of both discovery and familiarity.

Katrin Pauts (b 1977) rocketed onto the Estonian literary scene in 2016 with her debut novel *The Policeman's Daughter* (*Politseiniku tütar*), which is the first volume in her own crime series and made her one of the country's most-read authors last year. The second book in this series has also been released since then: *The Torchbearer* (*Tulekandja,* 2017), the first print run of which sold out almost immediately. Pauts worked for close to ten years as a news and entertainment journalist, and had long dreamed of trying out her skills as an author. The colorful cast of characters she encountered during this media career only swelled her pool of inspiration, leaving Pauts with no choice but to start writing. Now, she also works as a freelance television editor and screenwriter.

Pauts' gloomy, hostile, and sometimes even bloodcurdling storylines are set within the picturesque natural beauty of Estonia's islands: Saaremaa, the country's largest, and Pauts' own home of Muhu. The character Eva Niimand (who is also a journalist) sets out to solve the mysteries. Like Rohelend's Silva Stökel, Niimand returns to her childhood home at the beginning of the series' first volume, and ends up finding the answers to a long-unsolved crime that is tied to her own past. In *The Policeman's Daughter*, three young women disappear from the little village of Tuulegi when the protagonist is just a child: one is later found dead, but the others vanish without a trace. Adding to the mystery, the main police officer investigating the case disappears, and his wife takes her own life by walking straight into the sea. In *The Torchbearer*, Niimand investigates the case of red-haired women

KATRIN PAUTS · PHOTO BY ARNO SAAR / SCANPIX



who are mysteriously being killed on dark, deserted roadsides.

Fear and loathing in little villages

The plot device of journalists – not detectives or undercover spies – investigating and solving crimes tends to be more the norm than an anomaly in contemporary criminal literature. Examples include Liza Marklund's protagonists Annika Bengtzon and Maria Eriksson, as well Stieg Larsson's well-known Mikael Blomkvist. The relocation of horrifying crime sites from metropolises to small rural areas also took place quite long ago in the genre: one popular example is naturally Caroline Graham's Inspector Barnaby and his bucolic but crime-filled Midsomer County.

Nevertheless, this fact doesn't diminish the contribution of Rohelend's and Pauts' novels to uncovering the terrible secrets and psychological reality of seemingly idyllic, sparsely-populated places. The somber social truth of life in deserted rural areas is convincingly portrayed here in a more contemporary style, with innumerable everyday tragedies existing alongside the bloody murders. As one of Pauts' characters remarks: "I don't doubt that you all know how such things go in places like those. She went to some party. She met somebody there, they were together for a couple days, and then she got pregnant. She looked the guy up, but he naturally couldn't care less. Would any of them? The girl and I discussed it, and we figured it'd be better for her to have it, all the same. We hoped we'd get by, somehow. It was the same with me, back then… he was the one who left us. I've never regretted it once, even though it was hard." (*Politseiniku tütar*, p 35)

Rohelend uses her fictional Omavere to depict the stuffiness and nastiness of a small town with extreme bluntness and precision. Far from the capital, in a place where corruption runs riot and everyone knows everybody else for generation after generation, tensions run deep in a strong culture of "just pretend everything's alright". Anonymity is nonexistent and every new resident is an event in and of themselves (usually an unpleasant one); every excessive question is met with scornful silence.

No one wants to lose their place in the small settlement's pseudo-hierarchy, and therefore it's simpler for the community to just look away from certain acts, including severe crimes. The locals do so in the naïve hope that even though nothing remains a secret forever, perhaps it will at least last until the end of their own lifetimes.

Whereas Rohelend's Omavere is an imaginary setting, Pauts' murders take place on the picturesque islands of Saaremaa and Muhu, where visitors and locals alike now have a reason to look over their shoulders with a sense of dread. Pauts' writing shows an exceptional flair for filling beautiful places with dread, but another subject entirely is the effect that crime-novel fame can have upon a small community, i.e. whether the locals themselves are pleased to be associated with a story that is gruesome, albeit imaginary. Estonians ordinarily make an effort to put their tiny hometowns on the map and lodge them in public awareness in positive ways, using tools that range from Estonian "extreme swinging" to local yard-café events… But then, all of a sudden, someone records these sites in literature as a place where someone was brutally murdered, or where a murderer grew up. At the same time, it's also possible this fame will attract large numbers of crime-fan tourists, who will boost the turnover at the local cafés in turn.

One thing is certain: Birk Rohelend's Silva Stökel and Katrin Pauts' Eva Niimand are undoubtedly women worth keeping an eye on in the coming years. The same goes for these characters' creators, who have confirmed in both word and deed that they are in the Estonian literary scene to stay. Pauts has teasingly hinted that much more than crime novels can be expected from her in the near future: "I think I won't be disappearing from literature any time soon, but whether crime will remain my genre – or how much more I can be bothered to write these island thrillers – is another thing entirely. I've actually already gotten pretty fed up with my protagonist Eva, which is also a cliché, I have to admit. Crime writers always say their main character annoys them. Agatha Christie hated Poirot, and Henning Mankell thought Wallander was an unpleasant person. That might also come from having had enough of it: I suppose writing a series inhibits a writer's fantasy from being in perpetual motion, to a certain extent."

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MARI KLEIN (b 1979) has been active in journalism with varying degrees of success for 20 years. She has edited more than 50 books and literary sections in several newspapers, and has written reviews and synopses.

Being led by literature

An interview with Job Lisman

Job Lisman is the editorial director of Prometheus/Bert Bakker Publishers in the Netherlands, which publishes such bestselling authors as Jeffrey Eugenides, Zadie Smith and Jo Nesbo, as well as the Estonian authors Jaan Kross and Andrus Kivirähk. What is more, Job has also attended several Head Read literary festivals in Tallinn. We met up to talk a little about books, publishing, and of course about Estonian literature and the festival.

So, to begin with, how did you find Estonia and the Head Read festival?

Actually, I was invited by Ilvi Liive the director of the Estonian Literature Center; we had been in touch for a while, because Prometheus publishes Jaan Kross. I joined Prometheus in 1999 and *The Ring of Mesmer* by Jaan Kross was one of the first translations I edited. So, we kept in touch with Ilvi and then in 2013 she invited me to come to Tallinn and be a fellow with three or four other editors. And I have kept coming back here since.

Is there anything you especially enjoy at Head Read festival?

The best part of the festival is that the quality and diversity of the invited writers is very high, but at the same time the group is not too big, so you have the idea you are not part of a huge group but of a nice small group. And there are plenty of opportunities for authors and editors to meet and mingle, either during the official activities, or later for dinner or drinks.

It was wonderful to meet some new people and also to bump into old publishing friends, in a city that has become very close to all of us. For me personally it was fun to see our author Joost de Vries in Tallinn. On the last night, in Pegasus (a place that is always a highlight anyway) we even met other Dutch-speaking people, including the Estonian writer Kairi Look, who speaks Dutch fluently.

How did you get into the publishing business?

Not the way you would think. Actually, I

JOB LISMAN · PHOTO BY PIETER VAN OS

studied law, because I had no idea what I wanted to do. Law apparently was useful: people said so! I even finished it, but I was not a very good law student, and I knew that I would be a bad lawyer. Also, I have always read a lot for pleasure, but I never wanted to study Dutch literature because I didn't want to approach in an academic way what I considered to be my passion. And then, during my university years I noticed there was such a thing as being an editor. I had no idea what it was back then, but when I moved to Amsterdam, I thought I would give it a try and become one. I started out in

a very small publishing house; it was more like a bookshop actually, but apparently it was the beginning of a career. I worked for another publishing house, and at one point I applied for a job at Prometheus, where I still am. It has been 18 years.

Prometheus publishes the works of Jaan Kross and Andrus Kivirähk in Dutch, which Estonians are really happy about, of course. But what led you to publish Estonian authors and how are they doing these days?

Well, Jaan Kross had already been published before I joined Prometheus. And because I love the books and the author, I decided to continue with him, even though we don't have a strong classic tradition in Holland, even with our own authors: when authors die, a lot of people lose interest in them. Books in Holland always have to be new; they have to be for the moment, to say something about our current time. The Dutch are not very focused on the past; they are more focused on the present and the future. Therefore, the genre of historical novels is a pretty difficult genre to sell. But I have noticed that a lot of Estonian novels are historical novels and, although Jaan Kross died in 2007, we still continued to publish him, because he is an excellent writer. You can publish one historical novel every once in a while; that might work out. We are about to publish *Between Three Plagues*, Kross's masterpiece. Two years ago during the summer I read the English translation that was published by the famous and great MacLehose Press, and it was such a glorious summer. There are two translators in Holland that translate from Estonian, so they cooperate. They are both busy now.

And Kivirähk for the Dutch reader?

When I first read his novel *The Man who Spoke Snakish*, I quickly understood that it was intertwined with Estonian mythology, which I knew nothing about. So, there were many references in the book that were meaningless to me and it just had to work as a novel, which it did. I bought the rights and it was published two years ago and very successfully: it sold around 5000 copies, which is very good for a book like that in Holland.

We published *The Man who Spoke Snakish* in 2015, although it was originally published in 2007. Lately, I have been thinking that maybe 2007 would have been too early to publish it in Holland and in Western Europe, because the way most reviewers reviewed it and the way I mostly read it was as *a book about a disappearing world,* a world destined to be lost. In a way, in Western Europe this feeling has grown much stronger during the last few years.

But what about your own your literary favorites?

Always so difficult to say…. Today I just finished the manuscript of the new novel by Joost de Vries, whose second novel, *The Republic,* will be published in Estonian very soon. He is one of our best young writers, and he has a great literary future ahead of him. These days he is definitely one of my literary favorites. **ELM**

2016
ESTONIAN LITERARY AWARDS

by Piret Viires

Jaan Kaplinski received a lifetime creative achievement award from the Republic of Estonia. **Andrei Ivanov** was likewise recognized for his creative achievements in 2015.

Jaan Undusk received the main 2016 Cultural Endowment of Estonia's Award for Literature for his book *On Estonian Writers' Worldviews* (*Eesti kirjanike maailmavaatest*). In the work, which is placed within a broad context, he seeks, with passion and refined style, the nucleus of the personality, spirit, and creative works of Estonia's key writers.

AINO PERVIK: PHOTO BY TAIRO LUTTER / SCANPIX

The 2016 Cultural Endowment of Estonia's Awards for Literature by genre are as follows:

Mait Vaik received the Award for Prose for his short-story collection *Unrepentant* (*Meeleparanduseta*), at the core of which are true-to-life stories about urbanized contemporary intellectuals' more or less successful fates.

The Award for Poetry went to **Vladislav Koržets** for his surprising debut collection *Songs or Such* (*Laulud või nii*), which is composed of his best poetry over the years. Several of the poems have already achieved fame as lyrics.

Paul-Eerik Rummo's play *Stones Fall Continuously from the Sky* (*Taevast sajab kõikseaeg kive*) won the Award for Dramaturgy. Rummo gleaned inspiration from Jaan Kross' novel *The Rock from the*

PAUL-EERIK RUMMO AND VIIU HÄRM · PHOTO BY TAIRO LUTTER / SCANPIX

HASSO KRULL · PHOTO BY TAIRO LUTTER / SCANPIX

Sky, extracting various motifs and quotes from it in altered form.

Aino Pervik's literary fairy tale *The King of the Valley of Woe* (*Hädaoru kuningas*) won the Award for Children's and Youth Literature.

The collection *Bridge of the Enigma* (*Mõistatuse sild*) by **Hasso Krull** received the Award for Dissertation.

The Award for Translated Literature from a Foreign Language into Estonian went to **Riina Jesmin** for two translations from Romanian: Norman Manea's novel *The Return of the Hooligan* (*Huligaani tagasitulek*) and Mateiu I. Caragiale's novel *The Kings of Curtea-Veche* (*Curtea-Veche kuningad*).

The Award for Translated Literature from Estonian into a Foreign Language went to **Merike Lepasaar-Beecher** for her translation into English of Jaan Kross' *The Ropewalker: Vol. 1* of the *Between Three Plagues* trilogy.

Triinu Pakk received the Award for Translated Dissertation into Estonian for her translation of Edward Gibbon's *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*.

The Cultural Endowment of Estonia's Free Award was given to **Tõnis Tootsen** for his intriguing work *The First Day* (*Esimene päev*), which is a richly illustrated, hand-written philosophical fantasy novel.

The awards for Russian-language authors went to **Aurika Meimre** for her work

A. Chernyavski and His Novel The Seven Months of St. Bridget. *Commentary*, and to **Ljudmilla Kazarjan** for lifetime achievement in literature.

Hasso Krull also won the Award for Articles with his afterword to Ene Mihkelson's poetry collection *All Ladders are Backwards* (*Kõik redelid on tagurpidi*), entitled "The ladder over the ruins. Ene Mihkelson's allegorical poetics".

The Betti Alver Award, which is given for the past year's most outstanding literary debut, went in 2016 to **Silvia Urgas** for her poetry collection *Destination* (*Siht / Koht*), and to **Andris Feldmanis** for his novel *The Last Thousand Years* (*Viimased tuhat aastat*).

The 2016 A. H. Tammsaare Albu Parish Prize for Literature, which is awarded annually to a work that addresses contemporary topics or the life or works of A. H. Tammsaare, was given to **Tiina Laanem** for her novel *Falling Off the Picture* (*Pildilt kukkujad*).

The Eduard Vilde Vinni Parish Prize for Literature, which is awarded annually to the best work that follows the literary tradition of the classic Eduard Vilde, went in 2016 to **Mihkel Mutt** for his novel *The Estonian Circumciser* (*Eesti ümberlõikuja*).

The annual Viru County Award for Literature is given to the best artistic interpretation of Estonian national history in poetry, prose, or dramaturgy, and went in 2016 to **Mathura** for his work of lyrical prose entitled *Onto Ice* (*Jääminek*).

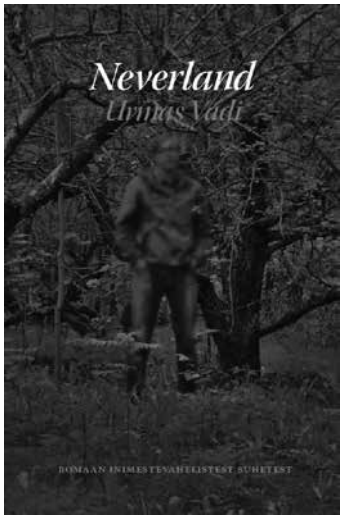
The Tallinn University Literature Award recognizes Estonian authors who are present or former TLU students. In 2016, the award went to **Berit Kaschan** for her poetry collection *I Laugh Sleeping* (*Ma naeran magades*), and to **Daniele Monticelli** for his translation of Lennart Meri's *Silverwhite* (*Hõbevalge*) into Italian. Also recognized was **Urmas Vadi** for his short story *The Award* (*Auhind. Vikerkaar*, 2016. No. 4/5).

The First Step Award aims to promote Estonian literary activity, and to encourage young writers. It is given to the author of the best literary text published in the print media. In 2016, the award went to **Berit Petolai** for her poems "Wolves and old men", "Yellowing day", and "To a girl", which were published in *Looming* (2016, No. 12).

Piret Viires (b 1963) is a professor of Estonian literature at Tallinn University. Her research focuses on contemporary Estonian literature, postmodernism, post-postmodernism, and the interaction between literature and technology. She directs the TLU Estonian Studies master's program, is on the board of the Estonian Literature Center, and is Vice-Chairwoman of the Estonian Writers' Union. Viires has written academic articles on literature, books, and also original prose.

Book reviews

by Peeter Helme and Jürgen Rooste



URMAS VADI · PHOTO BY LAURI KULPSOO

URMAS VADI
NEVERLAND

Kolm Tarka, 2017. 352 pp
ISBN 9789949815890

Issues of identity remain topical in Estonian literature, and are addressed by Urmas Vadi in his newest novel *Neverland*. Although the original title is in English, Vadi delves deeply into Estonia's social conditions, and the plot threads tightly throughout the city of Tartu. A large cast of characters marches before the reader and forms a nicely interworking ensemble, conveying a credible picture of present-day Tartu society. We find here people both young and old, who primarily belong to the middle class: something that has become increasingly harder to define.

The characters possess property, but it often appears like this property possesses its owners, giving them no joy. They have family ties, but even these tend to be a burden. Some have more, others less; some are one type, others another. And naturally, they have problems: the good old kind of problems without which there would be no literature. Some of these troubles and tribulations are of a medical nature, while others are more the legal type or concern morals, ethics, or identity. From this perspective, *Neverland* might not be so exclusively Estonian after all; rather, Vadi appears to

trace the essence of humanism. He simply has the skill to immerse it in a familiar atmosphere, which is necessary for establishing believability, i.e. for literature to be literature.

Vadi himself remarked in a TV interview that as he was writing *Neverland*, he became intrigued by certain questions: Do we understand one another at all? Are we really able to help someone else when they have a problem or concern?

In the early 2000s, Vadi emerged as a talented screenwriter and producer who has always been a fan of good humor. There is also a good dose of comedy in *Neverland*, although it is frequently seen through tears. Can a rape accusation be funny? Can the delusions of an elderly actress who has slipped into obscurity be classified as humor? Can the possibly self-destructive desire of a young man – one whose father is an ethnically Russian, retired Soviet military officer – to be a real Estonian make readers laugh, despite the sensitive topic? Or will all these things simply make one break into tears?

I personally can't say. Nevertheless, Vadi is highly capable of describing yearnings. Of describing all kinds of Estonians. All kinds of worlds. All kinds of lives. And the title itself alludes to this: a place, to which we'd all like to someday return, even if only in death. Still, the lives of Vadi's protagonists (or are they more like antagonists?) don't take exceptionally tragic turns. In this sense, the catastrophes that Vadi has his characters undergo are "cozy enough", but can something really be cozy if it's a perpetual everyday horror, something that makes you feel like life is disintegrating piece by piece, and that nothing is possible? Vadi at least describes this everyday brutality in a warm, melancholic way, and with a faint smirk at the corner of his lips. I suppose that's just how life should be handled. **PH**

ARMIN KÕOMÄGI

MINU EROOTIKA SALADUS (THE SECRET OF MY EROTICISM)

Sebastian Loeb, 2017. 238 pp
ISBN 9789949815548

Kõomägi has commented that the most intriguing aspect of his newest work is probably the title, which includes three words that reference a certain intimacy. Still, the book of sixteen short stories has no piece that shares the same name.

And yet, *The Secret of My Eroticism* isn't merely a play on words or something meant to trick the reader: it does pertain to the selection of topics pervading these collected works. Firstly, the stories are personal. Kõomägi has included the background story or drive for penning each piece, binding the diverse potpourri into a single bouquet. Secondly, the stories do often deal with sex and eroticism, which run through the work like a thin red line. Thirdly, the secret. Ever since Kõomägi won the 2006 Tuglas Short Story Award with his somewhat absurd "Logisticians Anonymous" (which is no metaphor!), he has particularly loved describing what is *personal,* not great social phenomena. He enjoys understanding a specific person together with the individual's quiddities, oddities, development, as well as all the reasons that ultimately make someone who he is in the eyes of himself and others.

ARMIN KÕOMÄGI · PHOTO BY PIIA RUBER

Yes, the character may be a wacko, such as John in Kõomägi's short story "John's Day", in which the narrator speaks about a man who hasn't been blessed by much in life, aside from his ability to churn out kids. Leaving a teacher's funeral, John swipes a bottle of liqueur from the table and cheats at a game of chess with the narrator. Regardless, he doesn't leave the impression of being a swindler, but rather a man on his way towards happiness. And in the end, he'll arrive. Probably. In any case, each story ends on a humorous up note. Everyone merely tries to be on their way towards happiness.

The very next story in the collection, "Perfection", is also truly grotesque. It tells of a young politician who, late at night, goes home to his mother after a tiring work day. The mother starts reviewing possible female companions for her son online. They pick apart photos together, the mother's expert gaze seizing upon every existing or ominous physical flaw and hints of possible breast implants: she doesn't miss a thing! The story ends with a predictable incest scene without actually turning into pornography, because that doesn't interest Kõomägi. Rather, he aims to critique Estonian politics through a fun-house mirror, while stylistically focusing on the personal surface and not rushing to make dubious generalizations.

The Secret of My Eroticism is a diverse collection, overall. Kõomägi demonstrates his good sense of literary form and precisely what we knew about him before: the author feels most at home in the short story genre, and he feels especially comfortable in the humorous and slightly grotesque, where he is fantastically adept at provoking art while remaining gentlemanly. For, as we all know, everything ultimately unfolds in the reader's own mind.

MAIMU BERG
HITLER MUSTJALAS. NOVELLID
(HITLER IN MUSTJALA.
SHORT STORIES)
Tuum, 2016. 221 pp
ISBN 9789949979462

Hitler sells; it's true. He's become one of modern society's most grotesque celebrities, and the grand old lady of Estonian

literature, Maimu Berg, pokes fun at this grotesqueness in turn. In truth, only one of the book's stories involves Hitler – the first. Stalin and Beria take the stage in a few others, Putin is discussed, and none other than *Bundeskanzler* Merkel ends up finding a relative in a backwater Estonian village. Later, the author also tackles other topics.

Scanning the cast of characters that populates the first section of the book, it's clear that these stories are not overly serious. At the same time, such an approach can be deceiving: Berg always has a trick up her sleeve. For instance, a question left hanging at the end of "Hitler in Mustjala[1]" is whether the author has penned an alternative history, or if she has merely described her childhood summers together with the local legends and stories she picked up. Specifically, there exists a myth that, after fleeing Berlin, Hitler spent his final years as a village kook on Saaremaa.

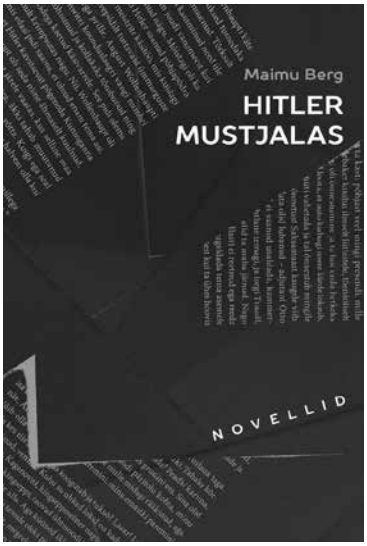
"Stalin in Tallinn" similarly concocts a tale about how Stalin and his cronies decide on a whim to travel incognito to the capital of the Estonian SSR, but it turns out that the story is an odd explanation for how and under what circumstances the author's aunt had the "opportunity" to see distant places in the Soviet homeland, i.e. by spending close to six years in the Gulag system. Now, the reader naturally might ask: does Maimu Berg even have an aunt, and if she does, then is the story truly about her relative, or is it merely literary fiction?

Berg's stories should always be read attentively, in any case, for she invariably addresses several topics at once, and that is a good quality in a writer, especially with short texts, in which Berg is capable of cultivating entire worlds using very few words.

The first few of the seven short stories do revolve around contemporary and historical figures, but the second part of the book is somewhat more personal and tranquil – this not in terms of content ("*Ya liubliu vas, ya liubliu vas, Olga*"[2] is a truly dramatic story about an unhappy romance that ends in catastrophe), but of Berg's style of storytelling. The narrator is often the pro-

1 *A village on the island of Saaremaa.*

2 *"I Love You, I Love You, Olga" (Russian)*



MAIMU BERG. PHOTO BY KRISTJAN LEPP / AJAKIRJADE KIRJASTUS

tagonist, and one can frequently sense that the events being described happened to the author personally: anyone familiar with contemporary Estonian literary history will recognize several instances. Even so, this doesn't detract from the reading enjoyment or the stories' literary worth. Berg simply is an author capable of being playful and fantastical when she wishes, and at the same time of staying true to herself while taking inspiration from personal experiences. Both sides of the author are equally enjoyable, and provide the reader with opportunities to identify with and become immersed in the stories.

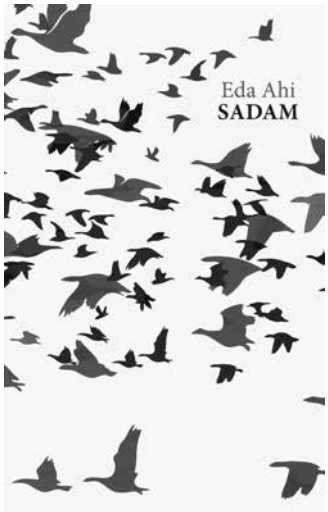
EDA AHI
SADAM (HARBOR)

Tallinn, Verb, 2017. 48 pp
ISBN 9789949984152

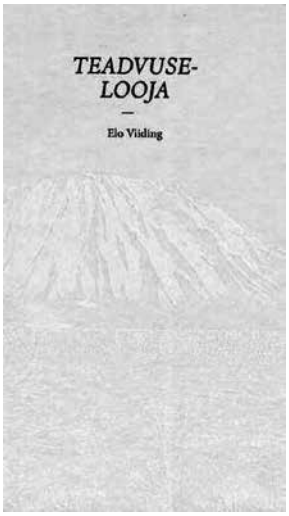
Eda Ahi is a self-standing great of contemporary Estonian poetry. Admittedly, the average Estonian reader (and most amateur poets) still views poetry as something put to rhyme and rhythm; as tied to speech. Ahi does also write that kind of poetry, but she's rather alone in riding the wave. She is perhaps comparable only to today's rappers and hip-hop poetry, the form of which generally requires rhyme and rhythm. Yet, Ahi's genetic descent is from highbrow poesy, and her debut, the award-winning collection *Masquerade* (*Maskiball*, 2012), has been likened to Betti Alver's style. *Masquerade* was followed by the restless winds of Ahi's *Gravity* (*Gravitatsioon*, 2013) and *Security* (*Julgeolek*, 2014).

Then, Ahi displayed her strong linguistic talent and knack for rhyme, flirting with "great Russian poetry" and making references to Estonian poetry history (while simultaneously showing a sense of self-irony), as well as concealing autobiographical elements in poetic word play.

Harbor is Ahi's best collection to date. It creates a somewhat mild world: the atmosphere of an old wooden residential neighborhood near the downtown. But it also feels like there is more darkness than before. Pretty metaphors are smeared and broken: "I dwell not in the same disquiet, / although I still now find lands / that are sad that are shattered / in whose breast pocket mines sprout / into towering stalks of death's disquiet" ("Hackberry", p 16). In some sense, one could say that Ahi's more masculine side pushes forth in the new



EDA AHI · PHOTO BY KAIDO VAINOMAA



ELO VIIDING · ARCHIVE PHOTO

collection – coming off as stronger, more decisive, more determinant, more longing, and more ready to walk out as the lover in a relationship, but also much more clearly bohemian. The voice of Ahi's protagonist is more of a trickster, but also more melancholic than before.

Ahi's metaphors also seem moodier and more shifting than in earlier collections: "you light matches in the wind. / but acorns sprout in your pocket." ("Harbor", p 8), and "light the match fast / to dispel the smell of death." ("Foaming", p 12). Ahi writes what is personal with bold, sweeping generalization – it becomes poetry, not a realist's recording. She's sometimes cold, but sometimes very warm. Occasionally, she finds a way to use the style as a kind of willful confession: "there's no escaping your native climate. // I've made honest choices. I've made a distinction. glaring mistakes. / disheartened quite a lot of men. / disheartened the only right man. / -- any regrets? probably just that last." ("Inventory", p 19).

Yes, *Harbor* has its fair share of romantic poetry that is passionate and scornful – acknowledging its own intensity and lust, only to ridicule it on the very next page and resuming its freedom game. Some sections converse with earlier poetry by Kristiina Ehin (such as Ehin's *Spring in Astrakhan*, 1999): there is a degree of macaronics; there is lithe and girlish teasing. Sometimes, I feel like I can recognize my whole life in Ahi's poems: "it's hard to speak. / there's rasping in my throat. / there's still the taste of yesterday's words in my mouth" (p 9). At the same time, Eda Ahi is larger than life. She writes about our era, herself, and love, and in doing so, she plays with them just like she does with poetry: gracefully. Almost effortlessly. And then, you find lines that cause pain; and then, there are lines that appear hidden in a deck of cards.

JR

ELO VIIDING.
TEADVUSELOOJA (CONSCIOUSMAKER)

Tallinn, Tuum, 2016. 64 pp
ISBN 9789949979431

Consciousmaker begins in a psycho-mythological manner: "Wind like a snake / back along the wall / down / and in and out of it // only thus / can you alter your fate / if your

consciousness is a wall // speak with the wall" (p 7). It's good that the author doesn't hand us a clear key or an answer to whether she is dissecting human psychology, or indeed mythologically inspecting our world and existence. At the same time, the work contains repetitive, threatening, and alluding snake imagery; a certain demonism; Lucifer, who turns out to really be Saint Lucia, and alights in the midst of Estonia's sacred Song Festival; chaos and a meek prophet who fails in his lenience. Viiding is concise, precise, and painful, while at the same time not showing the reader any mercy, not giving anything away.

The demonic and the bourgeois are united and contrasted in snake eyes: "he is god incarnate / you ID-card number / bank's Christmas greetings' recipient / have to swallow fellow females' food pics, / hunter, gatherer's conformist berries / lecturing on harmonic dispositions / conveyed to you by a gurgling government // the strands of your spider webs / run parallel" (p 31). Viiding has always had her own bone to pick – her own struggle – with bourgeois numbness. She dissected that world even in her early poetry, and as time passed, she has done so ever more severely and mercilessly. It is no place for living; for existing with dignity. It's a kingdom of losing oneself, although sometimes losing oneself in that kingdom is monkishly crucial.

Viiding's cold and distanced mannerism is still intact in *Consciousmaker*. She's almost always favored a chilly and non-intrusive voice and manner of observation, even when she dons someone else's skin, or when practicing the ruthless voice of an Old Testament judge. In any case, even I would describe it as a coldness – sometimes a biting coldness. Here, Viiding constructs something akin to her own mythological world. The first-person voice recalls: "When I was a young girl, / I thought of the river by the aul[3], / where there lived a bad-tempered man who healed everyone. / I stepped into that river, and it was unsuitable. / But the bad-tempered man called from the riverbank: "Swim here, my dark side!"" (p 41). Alas, the girl can't swim, and when the current finally delivers her, that world is gone. All that has begun is an endless dark continuity. Is that where this callous, cold voice and way of thinking emerged? There are a few more such fairy tales hidden in the collection, such as a holy man who is ultimately encountered in front of a grocery store's bottle-return point, or the soldiers of destruction biding their time in the void.

Viiding also addresses poetry: "You're too old / to read read read through / all the world's love poetry / which you've always despised / which you've always created / feeding the space's insatiable craving" (p 44). While the discussion of Estonia's poetic generation of Angry Young Women (possibly including Teede and Tasuja and Läks and Grigorjeva and Turk, et al.) has surfaced from time to time, Viiding might be called the original angry young woman of Estonian poetry. This wouldn't be entirely true, of course (I realize that it's a metaphor and labeling, but as a critic I must address poetry somehow, and the image doesn't seem so false from a distance, though I understand it might offend someone), but it is precisely Viiding's harshness, callousness, boldness, and criticalness that laid the foundations.

3 A type of village in several Central Asian cultures.

KRISTJAN HALJAK · PHOTO BY PILLE-RIIN LARM

In truth, this has nothing to do with feminism or the female cause; rather, Viiding (originally Elo Vee) simply came to fill an immense void that existed in Estonian poetry in the 1990s, and she filled it with her language, expressions, harsh imagery, and stories. She created a surface for others so that now this more expressive, critical, realist, and scathing style has become a certain normality. And this normality partly exists because of the fact that *Consciousmaker* is more cryptic, less expressive, and charged with a religious or mythological imagery: totally unique among Viiding's works. It is an extremely significant body of texts that could easily also indicate a new direction. **JR**

KRISTJAN HALJAK
CONCEPTIO IMMACULATA.

Tallinn, Vihmakass ja Kakerdaja, 2017. 65 pp
ISBN 9789949811212

Kristjan Haljak is the only credible decadent of Estonian literature. His poetry isn't derived from the usual angst of youth, but spreads its roots in the rich soil of 19th-century French poetic tradition. Having translated both Lautreamont and Baudelaire, Haljak possesses a deep-reaching intellectual capacity.

We don't need to know the identity of the poetic I's yearned-for "Maria" (we are told that she likes anise candies). But we're told something about Haljak himself: "KRISTJAN haljak / was born here / and here / died there / and there / amid land / and sky / land / moon / and sun / to warm sheets yellow / hay in white light's furrow / this side of evil / that of good." (p 13). Haljak's primary means of enchantment is his style: it turns fluid even in his restless live performances, done in perpetual motion. His character is like a soft machine-gunner who overwhelms us with a doleful, but also orgasmic current: "Lately your walls are / differently tempting walls / death cloths a flowing coffin I don't / like feminine men you know / moreover that reek of smoke and unshaven / beard this time the walls are much more / monkeyish aren't they // an eight-legged stool / stockings' rainbow on a drying / rack African free jazz / the imperialist's hangover ahh / fired ah women / don't like to the colony / peter to the colony christian / flowing walls that coffin contains / openness and windows

floor to ceiling // a clean briefcase perfume tie and / cyanide two white shirts" (p 4).

Haljak is able to channel a stream of thoughts and senses, in which images that initially seem to mesh spill out from one another: the destruction of sentences and twisting of grammar is unavoidable. He gives a new name and form to device sequence and associative poetry. We can, of course, also label it the foggy whims of a romantic decadent: always the poet; French, naturally French! It's far from pickles and bland sauce, and many readers enjoy this type of attitude: so far from the common, so wandering and free, so crazy-and-beautiful. It's in this feverish state that one discerns Haljak's status as a visionary poet, as a kind of William Blake: "I sneezed and saw that / Satan was walking on Wismari Street / wearing a peasant shirt a garland / of yellow blossoms upon his head / I sneezed and saw Satan / walking and carrying a cross / I sneezed and I saw that / --- / (p 23).

Haljak's poems appear (and exactly that, they *appear,* for who am I to truly see into a poet?) to arise out of his wanderings, chance encounters, and images found on the street, in cafés, and in other people. Out of *impressions*. He occasionally contradicts this by telling a realist story or describing an everyday scene, but also fetters us with its charm. Haljak makes images flow using his "prose chopped into poetry" effect. Even so, despite his howling imagery, he is a realist, one of us. He is a soul gripped by life itself, and one that records it.

Ah, right: we *do* find something out about Maria. In the last poem of the collection, it turns out that she is apparently immortal. This is a comfort for us scoundrels, for us poets, who need to admire and long for a woman as if she is a redeemer. Or else, simply as if she is a muse. Or a medusa. **JR**

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

JÜRGEN ROOSTE (1979) is a poet, journalist, and one of the most renowned writers of his generation. He has published fourteen collections of poetry and received the Cultural Endowment of Estonia's Award for Poetry on two occasions, among many other recognitions.

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