

ESTONIAN  
LITERATURE  
2025

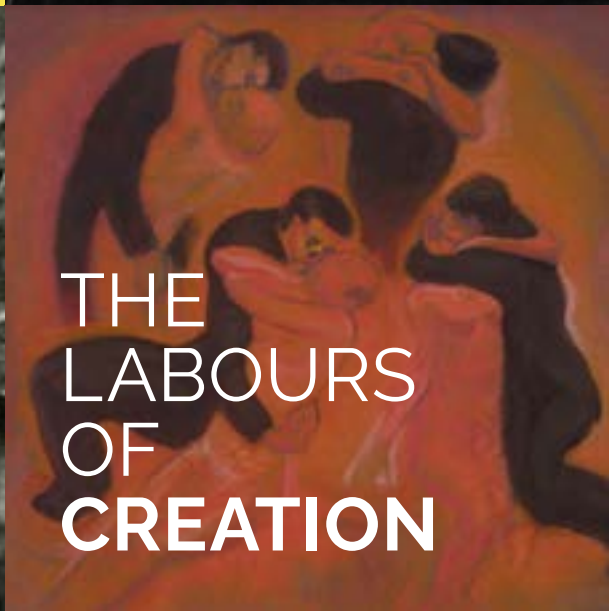
# ESTLIT



THE  
TRICKSTER



LAST  
TANGO  
IN KYIV



THE  
LABOURS  
OF  
CREATION



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KRISTJAN HALJAK  
Editor-in-chief

# EUROPE, OUR SOFT MACHINE

This is the first print issue of **EstLit. Estonian Literature**, published by the Estonian Literature Centre. Back in the spring the very first release – a web issue themed around dark, psychedelic humour – appeared at [www.estonianliterature.ee](http://www.estonianliterature.ee). In many ways it foreshadowed this, sowing the seeds for the fertile outburst we now witness this autumn.

In some respects one could say that this harvest is more explicitly political than the spring foray, while still sustaining the poetic and affective undercurrents whose existential value endures beyond war and the fears bound up in it. Yet, in reflecting the concerns of our literature today, we cannot avert our gaze from the dangers that arise from our eastern neighbour's aggressive politics, which resound across the poetic landscape as well.

Perhaps most directly, such feelings and reflections are conveyed by two works at the heart of this issue: Maarja Kangro's short story 'Last Tango in Kyiv' and Andrei Hvostov's essay 'On the Impotence of War'. But the broader struggle for freedom – both inner and outer – is carried forward, in one way or another, by the other texts printed here, too.

At the same time we also draw attention to authors whose focus, rather than the pressures of external reality, falls on the impassioned motions of the realities

welling up from the deep layers of the human psyche – perhaps most intensely, in all their strangeness, in Ian Gwin's translations from one of the early twentieth century's most experimental poetic revolutionaries, Jaan Oks, and his prose poem 'The Females'. But these ambiguous depths are also intensively explored in the poems of Triin Paja, Sveta Grigorjeva and Ernst Enno.

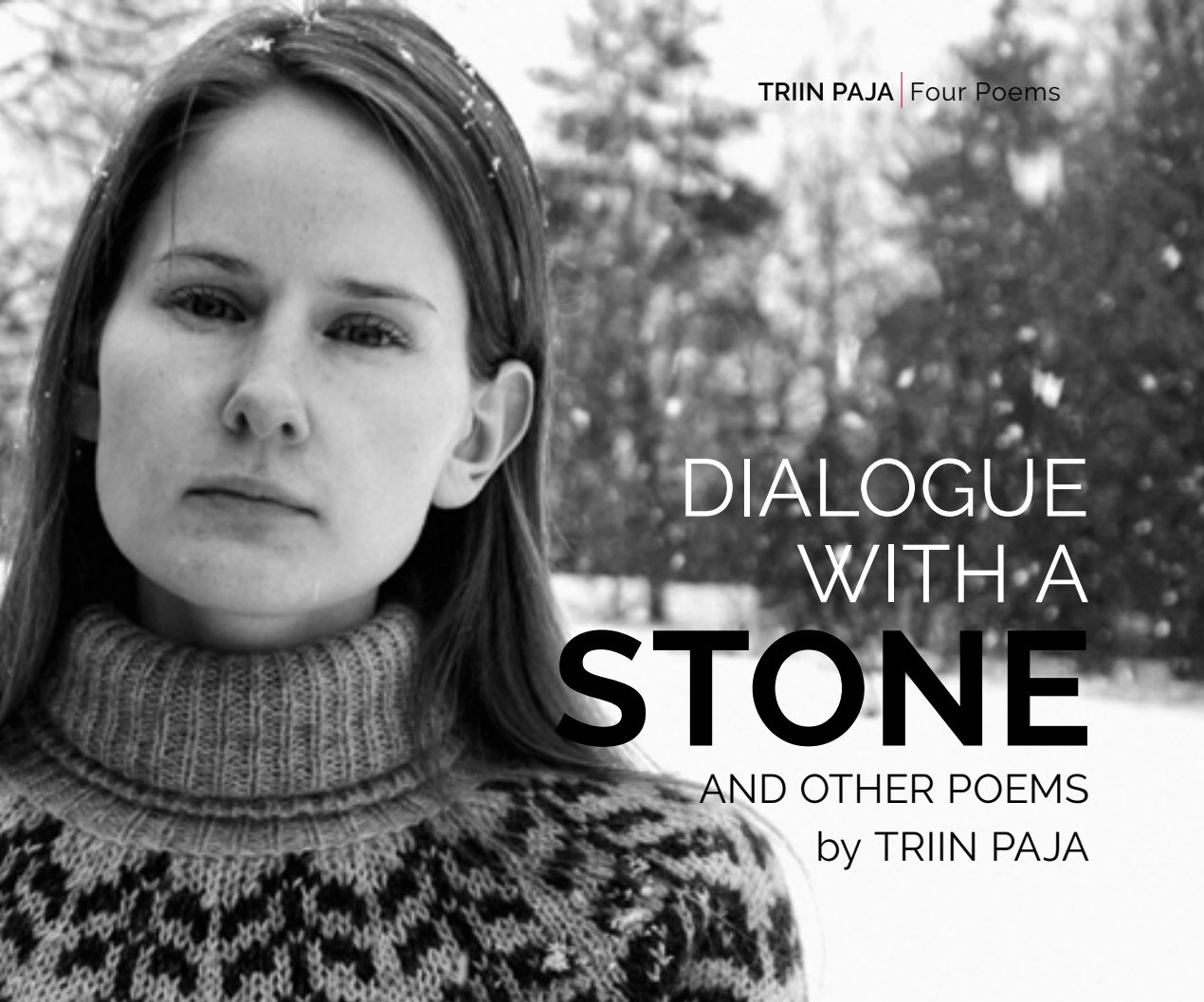
What are we to understand by Europe as a soft machine? With an implicit nod to the American Beat classic by William S. Burroughs, we might conceive of Europe as a living organism – one whose organic, mutable nature becomes metaphorically all the more vivid precisely when faced with the kind of danger to which the Russian Federation's aggressive politics subjects it. Europe's future is in question, in body as well as in soul.

We may nevertheless hope that it is in crisis that we feel European unity most intensely.

The unchecked sowing of fear of war is not always the wisest creative or existential strategy, psychologically speaking. Yet we cannot forget that Ukrainians' struggle today is also a struggle for our freedom as Estonians – as Europeans.

We hope that the polyphonic content of this issue also conveys the variegated plurality of Estonian literature as a soft machine in its own right. In the broadest sense, ideologically, we strive for freedom – corporeal and poetic, psychic and political. ■





# DIALOGUE WITH A STONE

AND OTHER POEMS

by TRIIN PAJA

TRIIN PAJA (b. 1990) is a poet who writes in both Estonian and English. The texts presented here were originally written in English and appear for the first time. Her most recent English-language collection, *Sleeping in a Field* (2025), won the Wolfson Poetry Chapbook Prize.

## The Boy at the Ballinskelligs Abbey

the boy weaves through graves and grasses.  
such boys still surface to roam cemeteries  
letting the wind's feral cats scratch  
their cheeks, for the ocean's rim  
ships such winds  
even the sleepers gasp.  
is he saddened by the eggshells  
dried with the leak of life  
amid stones and thorned reds?  
of those mountains, I say:  
the mind is often engulfed  
by stark offerings.  
it is how he experiences his soul.  
the soul flies swiftly through chaos.

## The Tome of the Body

the desiring body is the sea,  
a sigh in saltblue, eel and reef.  
  
as the sea is plural, so is the body,  
antlered and milk-burdened.  
  
as the sea is lasting dismemberment,  
so is the body in womanhood

split.

## Dialogue with a Stone

I ask of this sea what is needful.  
the sea is a girl with a crushed tongue.

what is heard: mariner sweat

gull wings  
nearly braided in intimate nearness.

the erotic wind-weight in my shirt.  
the breeze of breathing.

as beavers carve rivers into lakes  
I too become another body of water

in a world plagued by water

o body of saliva, salt, birdsong  
who have lived and died

as any other, as once

in a prehistoric burial  
a child was laid on swan wings

as an oracle was laid on silk  
and deer bone: the body is

the precise sentence  
the profoundly erotic utters to the dead.

I kneel to pick a stone.  
the stone says, you are safe here,

and I say to the stone, this year, a country

reaffirmed stoning as punishment,  
stoning as death penalty.

I say to the stone, my sister's face  
is water, someone drops

a stone of sorrow  
into the water, then another.

the stone insists, you are safe here.

I observe the slow glide of swans –  
their necks slip trustingly into the water,

and the water does not behead them.  
the swans say, you are safe here.

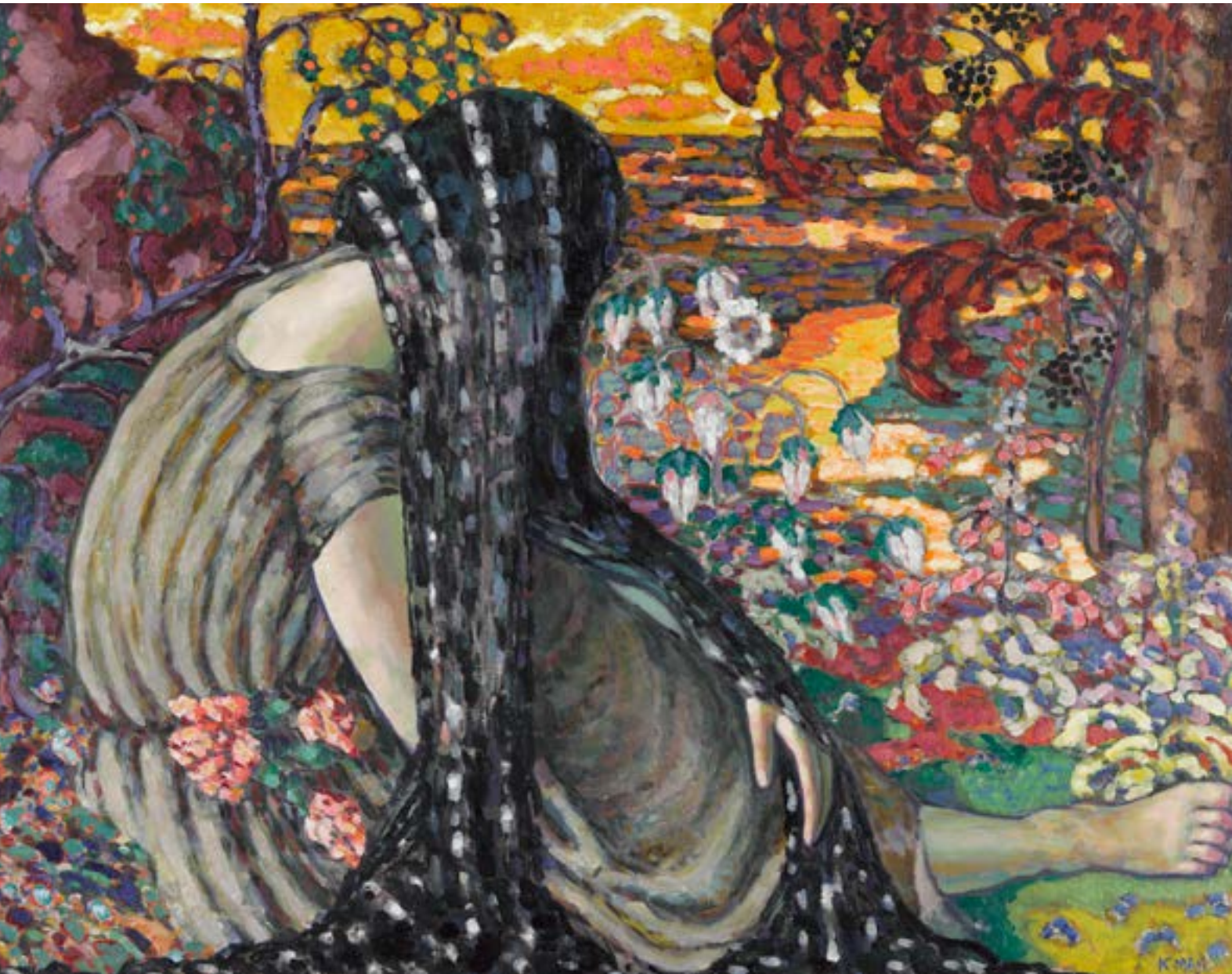
the sun laughs all day,  
I hear her,

so I point out to the sun,  
the stones are still falling.

even the lake is no longer  
the sleep of rivers, stirred so tirelessly –

the lake says to the swans,  
you are safe here, and the stones keep falling.





Konrad Mägi (1878–1925)  
**Meditation**  
 Oil on canvas, 1915–1916  
 Art Museum of Estonia

### Mildew, Mildew

in Belgrade, bread  
     was no longer looted,  
                     girls no longer looted,

a friend took me to see  
     a bombed building, and I stood  
                     under a hardened sun

trying to grip the wrist  
     of a more tender world.  
                     in the dove-grey city, I was mute,

the new words fragile in my mouth –  
     the fruit of speech  
                     mildewed when I spoke.

mildew, mildew, to sing it now,  
     but then I trembled, starved, still  
                     the glass of a shattered window

never touched my cheeks.  
     I trembled, starved – hungry,  
                     I thought of my grandmother's hands

powdered in sugar. I walked across floorboards  
     creaking like accordions  
                     betraying me – *quiet, floorboards,*

I needed to think quietly  
     of those girls, to give *zefir*, not bread,  
                     bird's milk, not eggs.

to the one lifting her hand  
     when a bullet passed her,  
                     mistaking the sound

for a mosquito,  
     I needed to give a slab of sunflower seed halva,  
                     sugared cranberries, heather honey.

# THE UNIVERSE IS MY TINDER

POEMS by  
SVETA GRIGORJEVA

Translated by Adam Cullen

SVETA GRIGORJEVA (b. 1988) is an Estonian poet and choreographer, whose recent works include the poetry collection *Frankenstein* (2023) and the essay book *Kliitor on anarhist* (*The Clitoris Is an Anarchist*, 2024).

**The universe is my Tinder.** Which basically means that when I get the feeling like I want somebody (i.e. to fall in love with), I send out a mental wish into the universe à la: 'Clouds, trees, water, fire, air, hills, plants, etc., the cosmos, in short, uh, hey, can you hear me? Please send me the handsomest, coolest, sexiest, funniest, bravest, smartest, book-loving person, preferably a man, but, well, I'm open to the idea of being open, that I could fall in love and love someone regardless of gender, too. But just in case, please go ahead and send me a man, okay?'

Unfortunately, I've got to admit that the universe is a very slow Tinder. Because it's basically been forever since I sent out a similar wish and I don't seem to have met that handsomest, coolest, smartest guy. I suppose I've gradually come to terms with the possibility that as the given 'platform' does possess a certain degree of temporality that in no way fits today's left-right-fuck-and-chuck tempo and temperament, the universe might send me that person in the next life, or even the one that follows.

You know, it's totally possible (or at least can't totally be ruled out) that two lives from now, I'll reincarnate as a koala instead! And therefore, it's not that the right person for me doesn't exist. The thing is that I'm still a person. The thing is that I'm not a koala yet.

. . .

**is weakness the new strength** the new form of resistance is fragility maybe our common fate everyone's shared form of existence for the first time in ages I wanted to write something extremely fragile something that doesn't walk on two legs that doesn't look or sound like a text that needs a guide dog a guide spider a guide koala a guide lobelia a guide river guide dirt I wanted to suddenly weaken into weakness so my poetry wouldn't be strong any more wouldn't be let's fuck things up any more it's so masculine rigid erect stiff arrogant thinks it can penetrate anything as if it were nothing I wanted something softer an eternally impotent text that'll never rise again a text for which nothing will ever rise again I wanted a poem that was slow that crawled like a snail like clouds on a day with the slowest breeze a text that doesn't metaphorically overload on capitalist drugs to stay up all night a poem that could never again be hitched to the latest-model wagon of productivity-faith society a poem that through weakness resists the everlasting cult of speed and strength a poem that doesn't have a muscular sexy six-pack but jiggling wiggling cellulite and acne scars a poem that refuses to cooperate to work dully and trivially a poem that isn't assembly-line work or uninsured freelancing a poem that isn't a privileged white man a poem that senses its boundaries how delicate they are I so very wanted to write a text so-so weak like an infant who can't hold its head up yet I wanted a weak little text whose head to hold then I realized poems that are not soft don't exist there is no such thing as a strong poem no matter what might be said in it what words are used even with extremely sharp edges it's fragile all poetry is extremely weak even if it says words like pussy shit ass or cock maybe especially then



# LAST by MAARJA KANGRO TANGO IN KYIV

Translated by Darcy Hurford

MAARJA KANGRO (b. 1973) came to the Estonian literary world as a translator of Umberto Eco, Andrea Zanzotto and Valerio Magrelli and became a poet somehow and somewhere through translating.

After three collections of poetry Kangro has been drawn to prose, where she stays as witty and unexpected as in her poetry. For her short stories she has been awarded the prestigious Friedebert Tuglas Short Story Award in 2011 and in 2014.

In April 2024, Maarja Kangro was elected the chair of the Estonian Writers' Union.

The flags, mostly turquoise and bright yellow, gave the cemetery a charmingly athletic air. Thousands of flags with a utopian energy, big ones and little ones. It was like that all over the place, wherever there were flags out. In cemeteries, at memorials, by monuments. Death inside a youthful, hopeful frame. There were red and black flags, too, but they weren't the kind of superficial Westerners who took these symbols the wrong way.

Like a zombie, Iti roamed around Lychakiv cemetery on the Field of Mars. Before the Great War, people had sunbathed and had picnics on the lawn here. It had been an Austrian military Cemetery Before the big war started, she was told, and then a memorial to the Red Army, but then the bones of the Red Army had to be moved because the old grounds no longer had enough space for those who had fallen in the new war.

She took a picture on her phone and looked at the face. Senior Lieutenant Ilona Orlova, fallen in battle at thirty. And thirty-year-old Natalya, nicknamed Vitaminka. I wonder if she was Vitaminka because she was a medic, or because of a joke with her comrades on the front?

Uniforms make things tricky, you could see that. Not everyone can break free of them. You can explore Merleau-Ponty or evidentialism in different languages, but as soon as you put on a uniform, you're clumsy, simple, even needy somehow. Iti imagined her loved ones wearing mottled uniforms. Some of them had been in uniform at some point, even the Soviet one, or an Estonian, Finnish, or Polish one, but most of the people she knew hadn't been involved in military service at all, in many countries they didn't have to any longer, and even when they did, they found a way of not having to.

There were some whose uniforms clung to them: mainly people with smooth, broad cheeks and broad chins. The uniform didn't happily swallow up people with eyes that were more deeply piercing or narrower of face, or had hollow cheeks, though. Imagine putting a uniform on Schiele's self-portrait? Juhan Liiv, Rilke, and Nietzsche would have retained an anxious look as well, despite their broad noses.

But some chubby man who's spent his life doing nothing but brain work – no two ways about it, the uniform swallows him! It looked like Iti's impression was unforgivably superficial.

People came, some brought a candle or fresh flowers to a grave, although most of the flowers were plastic – understandable, it was cold this time of year.

Some visitors sat down on a bench next to a grave, lit up a cigarette and looked at the photograph of the deceased. A boy, dead before his twentieth birthday.

Wonder whether or not they want Estonian war tourists taking pictures of their loved ones? A complete stranger's phone retaining a memory of your Maxim or Ihor, at sunset, in beautiful colours.

Three fresh graves had been dug in the hard, cold, light-brown soil; empty holes still. Three people from the Lviv region had been killed, identified, and their relatives informed; soon, they would be brought there.

How do you think about someone on the front line, there like Schrödinger's cat, always having to be prepared to hear that they are actually already dead? Or with the stubborn, inevitable hope that nothing will happen?

If I'd known it was so cold here, I would have brought my woollen-lined mittens with me.

Sanna, Tom, Teele and Rainer also arrived at the fresh graves. They looked sympathetically at the windows of the apartment buildings, which looked on to the rapidly filling cemetery field. Drink coffee, watch funerals. Then the next funerals.

'Is it getting quieter?' Iti said. 'It'll be dark soon, let's go and have something to eat.'

The night train was leaving at 12.12 a.m. and arriving in Kyiv at 7.02 a.m.

The waiting room was labelled VIP Salon and the entrance was forty hryvna, ninety euro cents. You could get coffee, chocolate, beer and brandy at the bar.

The poets threw their rucksacks on to the chairs and got their phones and computers out. Iti walked around the hall, one of the walls had a large screen on it showing a soap. It seemed to be Turkish; the sound wasn't on. Nobody was really watching it anyway.

She ordered black tea and listened to the station announcements. *Шановні пасажери*. Dear passengers.

It was so similar to Polish. *Szanowani pasażerowie*.

Not that she knew Polish. A few phrases, some words. But it was a language that gave her erotic pleasure, took her back to her student years, when she had had a Polish boyfriend, two, in fact, but one was the main one and introduced her to the band Kult. She liked the Slavic languages west of Russian; they had a pleasantly different feel. As a Gretškina-era schoolchild, she began learning Russian in the first grade, with meaningless words such as *фартук* and *халат*

How do you think about someone on the front line, there like Schrödinger's cat, always having to be prepared to hear that they are actually already dead?



to make the alphabet clear, and then Russian became the default Slavic language. When she then saw that many of the Slavic languages, even the Eastern Slavic ones, were quite different, the shift made them charming.

She listened to the announcements of the arriving and departing trains. Who wouldn't love railway station news: modern classics. *Шановні пасажери*. Language is a time machine, she thought; a small distraction is a time machine, too.

Rainer had also come to the bar to order tea and smiled at Iti because he realized they were both listening to the station announcements. He asked, 'Do you know where the word *шановні* comes from? The root, I mean?'

'Um, that ... *shan* ...? I think...' Where the hell was it from, Iti had no idea either. She googled. The Polish dictionary told her it was from the German word *schonen*. Like *Dach* is roof in Polish and Ukrainian. Those bloody Germanics.

Rainer, yes, he was well-versed in languages. He even wrote poetry about language, but when he wrote poetry about other things, it had a good level of absurdity to it. He had witty children's stories about lice, moths and café pigeons, so maybe he'd appeal to Ukrainian children.

She took a sachet of black tea and looked at her colleagues.

When even Lithuanians were reading their poetry in Ukraine, Estonians couldn't allow themselves to be outdone. And they weren't. Then again, what do the Baltics have to say to Ukrainian poets anyway? More than the Dutch, perhaps, but they're still sitting comfortably, despite their geopolitical anguish. Let's talk about how we feel sorry for Ukrainians from our warm apartments and mentally stick it to the rampaging rulers. Because if our hearts weren't aching in our warm apartments or we weren't sticking it to the rulers, it would be a bloody sorry story. And then Teele can read to you about her climate anxieties and clear-cut forestland and the traumas of laying hens. Meanwhile, here in Ukraine, flaming pieces of a broken drone fall on the roof of a henhouse and hens that have already lived an unhappy life squawk: white feathers, blood and fire. Sanna half-reads, half-chants about how poets menstruate in the face of dazed old men, great, but who cares if poets menstruate under bombs as well. She didn't want to think about her own poetry. Observations of the Champagne Socialist: Oh, my conscience is so fat, tra-la-la, yeah-yeah-yeah. What's it all about, what is she trying to say: no one understands the existential issues of the bourgeoisie right now.

But anyway, they're going to Kyiv, they're going to Bucha, Irpin, Chernihiv – and maybe they'd write something completely new this week, gather creatively fertile material about the suffering of others. They can read it aloud at the Lviv festival.

Estonian children's books for the school children of Chernihiv, oh yes. Oh, I'm sure they're short of those there.



Oskar Kallis (1892–1918)  
**Passion**  
 Pastel on paper, 1917  
 Art Museum of Estonia

A Ukrainian poet had told her how a Norwegian poet had read about their own little ecological concerns at the festival, and then she thought about the dam in Kakhovka that the Russians had blown up. No, she didn't want to be disparaging about a colleague. Just that –

If you write about nursery porridge or fridge magnets here, it's something else. If you write about the smell of your blood here, it's something else.

We EU people, though – even our attempts to shock are homely, our provocations, our transgressions are kind of sweet, because there is no artistic transgression in wartime!

Damn it, she thought. There's nothing wrong with a poet not being a fool. We're not fools. We're here! Byrons of the new era, or well, no, not really.

If you write about nursery porridge or fridge magnets here, it's something else. If you write about the smell of your blood here, it's something else.

Sanna's brother Tom, a photographer, had come along with them specifically to take photos, for his own business and not with any Cultural Endowment funding.

Attention! Air raid alert! Proceed to the nearest shelter! Don't be careless! Your overconfidence is your weakness!

The expressions on the faces of the people in the VIP room did not change.

'Ooohh,' said Teele, fiddling with her phone. 'I've already set up this app for Kyiv.'

'I think there's an air raid there every night,' Tom said.

'That's Mark Hamill,' Iti said. 'That guy, who, um, was in *Star Wars*.'

'Luke Skywalker?' Tom said.

'That's him. I've started to think better of *Star Wars*,' Iti said. 'You never know how life will turn out. I used to have a Ukrainian-speaking woman on the air alarm app, I liked it more, it was for language learning.'

Pronouncing it as carefully as she could, she said, 'Увага! Повітряна тривога! Пройдіть найближче укриття!' Attention! Air raid alert. Go to the nearest shelter.

Teele looked up from her phone and gave a sneaky grin.

'My parents don't even know I'm in Ukraine. We were chatting just now.'

'Hey, I even told my partner I'm in Poland,' Sanna said.

'I didn't tell my mum either; she wouldn't sleep a wink the whole time,' Rainer said.

Iti said, 'My mum knows, she's ordered lard.'

And they all roared with appreciative laughter, and Iti was pleased.

It was a blue train that looked like a train, not a space shuttle. They walked wearily towards the sleeping carriage because they didn't have sleeping compartment tickets; those sold out quickly here. You paid very little; you could travel nearly six hundred kilometres for seven euros. The carriage was hot and quiet, several people were playing cards in silence, and some were staring at their phones. Lots of people were already asleep – the train came from Uzhhorod. They climbed into their bunks with only a souvenir bottle of Medovukha.

Oh, and Iti also had a bag of cashew nuts bought in Poland, light green. She tore the bag open and offered them to the others, but nobody except Rainer took any.

She bit into a nut. Oh no. Ew.

'Fuck!' Iti whispered, and the girls went, 'Shhh, people are sleeping here, shhh.'

'Rainer, were your cashews okay?'

'No.'

'Ah! Jesus!'

'What's up?' Teele asked.

'There are moths in these, nesting in the cashews! There's some kind of white fucking moth web wrapped around everything. I've already swallowed some.'

'Euuuugh!' said Sanna.

'Pass me that Medovukha, Tom. Mmm, great.'

'You washing it down with that?' Tom asked.

'No, I'm doing an experiment. How to accelerate the multiplication of cells with alcohol, moth metastasis.'

'Oh no!'

'Let's see if it makes the baby moths develop faster ... from egg to caterpillar, from caterpillar to pupa ... boom!' Iti opened her mouth into a gawp.

Rainer sniggered.



‘Shhh, people are sleeping!’ the girls said.

‘Look, the next time I open my mouth, a kaleidoscope of butterflies will flutter out! Let’s have another sip. You want some, Tom? And now, flutter-flutter!’

‘Shhh, quiet!’

The train was overheated. Iti thought she was being clever and quick, dashing into the toilet at the start of the journey, pulling on leggings and a thin T-shirt, but it was still hot. Especially on the top bunk. The blanket she’d taken from the third shelf made no sense, even the white sheets were too much. Still, you had to have something around you, you couldn’t relax otherwise.

A socket, a socket. Without getting flustered, Iti found one behind the pillow. Phone charging, headphones on. The right Spotify playlist.

Her colleagues wrapped themselves in blankets and sheets and turned their faces towards the wall, but Iti swung onto her back on the bunk and mumbled to herself. She tried not to mumble too loudly.

*Я хотів би сказати* I would like to say

*Вова, їбаш їх, блять!* Vova, fuck them, fuck them!

*Я хотів би сказати* I would like to say

*Вова, їбаш, їбаш їх, блять!* Vova, fuck them, fuck them!

*А ми тобі будем помагати!* And we’ll help you!

Oh, she would have liked everyone to hear this, at least her colleagues. Musli UA, what a band! The singer was the manager of the football club who had initially opposed Zelensky but later declared that he would give his life for the president.

*Їбаш, їбаш їх, блять!*

*А ми тобі будем помагати!*

Iti waved her fists, first in one direction, then the other – just as long as it wasn’t against the wall.

She was so happy! A swig of water, Morshynska mineral water, no need for alcohol; it was a frenzy that raged on its own.

It was a wonderful, powerful feeling, being at the right time in the right place. At a shite time in the right place, right, right!

Dear, dear colleagues, now on the night train to Kyiv, dear, dear, wonderful local colleagues, with whom they stand in solidarity!

Shite time, right place, *їбаш, їбаш їх, блять!*

Religious people felt that kind of radiant satisfaction when they believed they believed steadfastly in something. The high of conviction! Wild!

*Я кайфую, я кайфую!* I’m on a high, I’m on a high. That was Musli UA’s next song, also really amazing. A text by a journalist, Lesya something, about how he would be on a high at Putin’s funeral. Or something along those lines.

*Я кайфую, кай-кайфую!*

If she were a soldier, she wouldn’t need to take speed, she’d be able to keep going on mineral water, in a stifling train between the sheets.

Impossible to sleep. But maybe there was no need to; she felt so hyper. *Я кайфую, я кайфую*, fuck, still should though.

Sleeep. She turned off the music and roaming. And then she turned the roaming back on because no sleep would come, but suddenly the phone network became faint, no more connections, just one bar, and then that went, too.

Gentle snoring from the bunks, but only gentle. Were her colleagues really asleep, or just trying to stay motionless?

She looked at Teele’s pink handbag, frayed at the edges. The artificial leather underlay was mercilessly exposed. Teele wore those Eskimo-like chunky laced booties. Not chic bootlaces, but with Eskimo laces, once white, but now vaguely sheep-skin-coloured. Teele was a lovely person with a beautiful marten-like face, but she could have found slightly nicer accessories. Rainer could have taken his black coat instead of his brown jacket, for God’s sake. In Iti’s imagination, the Estonians could have made a lasting impression in Ukraine: mm, shining, glittering, dazzling with their style! Could have, that is.

She turned to face the wall, then turned back to the open space, on her left side. On her stomach, on her back. *Я кайфую, я кайфую.*

When sleepiness finally began to creep up on her, a man walked through the carriage and bellowed: ‘Доброго ранку, доброго ранку! Кава? Чай?’ Good morning, good morning! Coffee? Tea?

Outside, the light was greenish-blue, then greyish-pink. Kyiv. Industrial day-break, nothing cosy about it.

The taxi driver took the five of them in a small car. Iti tried to utter some kind of hybrid language that wasn’t proper Ukrainian but was no longer Russian

If she were a soldier, she wouldn't need to take speed, she'd be able to keep going on mineral water, in a stifling train between the sheets.

either. But the taxi driver spoke blatant Russian. Shamelessly, just with h sounds instead of g sounds.

‘Ну, эстонцы молодцы! Крутые ребята!’ Well, Estonians are great! Cool guys!

How can they be so sweet  
and young, so fresh-faced and  
intelligent! Was it chauvinistic to  
wonder?

That’s right, Iti thought, why are you Estonians not coming here? Why go to Finland or Sweden when you can come to Ukraine? There’s solidarity here, there’s strange and great history here, there’s psychotherapy here.

Hotel Ukraina, Institute Street, Street of the Hundred Heavenly Heroes. But do they know the hotel used to be called Moskva? Imagine, Moscow sprawling out in the centre of Kyiv. Oh, when was it built? Um, in the sixties, 1961.

‘So, Hotel Viru in Tallinn is ten years newer,’ Rainer said.

‘Looks like it,’ said Sanna.

They couldn’t get into the hotel rooms with a view of Maidan from the tenth floor that early, but they could have breakfast in the second-floor restaurant, and, exotically enough, the food offering also included marinated tomatoes, which were a bit too vinegary. Iti was completely sleep deprived. They were all sleep deprived, the morning-grey Maidan was visible from the window, the pink sun had disappeared and a van with a Norwegian plate in military colours passed the hotel. Iti felt overflowing joy as she ate her boiled egg. Now they were here, they really were! Should she be ashamed of the emotion?

A black Mercedes, a V-class Merc with white leather seats and a mirror roof, drove them around Kyiv, Irpin, Bucha and Borodyanka. The driver was a Ukrainian-speaking, bearded man with fine facial features from Your Driver Company. Everyone here was Ukrainian-speaking now, in fact, the cityscape was Ukrainian-speaking. The old taxi driver had been something of an exception.

Ahead of them drove PEN Ukraine’s white van, already slightly rusty. Write to Exist.

The people at PEN were truly charming. What would the word for that be in Estonian? Sweet, *grazioso*. How can they be so sweet and young, so fresh-faced and intelligent! Was it chauvinistic to wonder? To think that she wouldn’t have expected it, but they’re so refined and young and intelligent here! Would she have been amazed if the literati in Germany had been so intelligent and refined and at the same time so young and beautiful – if they had been, that is.

They had to spend some time walking around Bucha church until the EU Parliament delegates had finished their tour. Inside was an exhibition of press

photos: the bodies of those murdered in Bucha and their exhumation. The noses of the dead were black.

‘Those are the milder versions,’ a tall cleric told Iti. From somewhere inside his long robe, he took out a phone and showed her the photos that weren’t shown in public because of the foreign visitors and children. The images on his phone showed red, half-burnt, darkened body parts, decayed wounds on naked bodies.

They must have been the people whose names Iti had photographed on the large memorial wall near the church, quite randomly, not recognizing any of the names. The fact of someone’s existence and their horrible death was stored on her phone. It didn’t give the deceased a pass to eternity, but now they were there, in yet another stranger’s phone memory. Also an existence.

As they travelled around, Iti tried to get an emotional handle on what had happened, the traces of the terrible events, the facts. She was terribly tired, they were all tired and serious, they took pictures, charming Maksym talked, explained. It seemed that Bucha and Irpin were comparable to Kyiv, a bit like Tabasalu and Viimsi were in relation to Tallinn. Borodyanka was considerably poorer.

Bullet holes in the walls, apartments bombed to bits, with wide-striped pale wallpaper, a house shot in half by a tank barrel.

How could anyone grasp the feeling of what it really was like? Take your loved ones, make them sit in the kitchen or on that beige sofa that’s now a mess. First, there’s a person, and then they’re mush. It seemed wildly important to her, right now, that she could feel it more acutely – the hideous, corrosive regret, the incredible horror. Since she was already here, she had to access the trauma, through shocking impressions, that would be right. Isn’t she capable of more than anger and rational compassion? She needed some proper, affective meditation work. Iti tried to concentrate. Someone had once looked out of those windows.

Bullet holes in the walls,  
apartments bombed to bits, with  
wide-striped pale wallpaper, a  
house shot in half by a tank barrel.

Tom and Sanna appeared at Iti’s side.

‘That big colourful teddy bear was here,’ said Tom. ‘Blue. Green.’

Iti sighed. ‘Yeah.’

‘I guess it was put there for people like us.’

‘Felt that way to me too,’ Iti said.



'I took a picture of it anyway,' Sanna said.

'Of course,' Iti said. 'So did I. And of the Banksy.'

'Sure.'

There was a sign next to Banksy's graffiti of David and Goliath, saying it belonged to the city of Borodyanka. And that the glass booth around it was alarmed. Alarmed, in the middle of ruins.

PEN took them out to eat at one of the first restaurants to reopen in Bucha after the massacre. There was a statue of a frog outside it.

They climbed out of their baroque Mercedes. Iti talked to the bus driver in English to start with, saying, come along, we're going to eat, they say the food's

very good, borscht and pierogi. Then, in Russian, what did it matter. The driver smiled, shook his head and replied in Ukrainian that he wasn't hungry, thanks. He was a quiet, smiling man, but maybe already over sixty, so military service was no longer a threat. University lecturers weren't at risk either.

To perform, to perform herself, to keep her head high in front of the camera, if at all possible. It was a habit of hers she couldn't stand.

On the way back, Iti started writing a postcard to a friend that she'd bought in the Sensi bookstore in Khreshchatyk. *Хуй вам, а не Київ*. Screw you, not Kyiv. She fell asleep in the passenger seat beside the bearded man.

The breakfast of marinated tomatoes, we'll eat them up again.

Iti galloped energetically down the stairs to the columned foyer, its white, shiny floor covered with red carpets. Then up a second staircase again ... but what? Teele, Sanna, Tom and Rainer were climbing out of a hole under the main staircase. White blankets under their arms.

'What the hell. Morning!'

'There was a heightened air alert,' said Sanna, looking at Iti with indignant incomprehension.

'Oh, right.' Iti wondered whether to hide her snigger.

'You were sleeping in the room upstairs, right?' asked Tom.

'Well yes. I slept well, too, the rooms here are perfectly cold. When it started getting light, there was this sudden loud bang, an anti-aircraft gun.'

'And Tetyana in Lviv told us to always go to a shelter if there's a raid when we're in Kyiv,' said Teele.

'She did, she did. I mean, when was the last time anyone in Kyiv was killed. It hasn't happened in a good while, for a few months, I don't remember.'

On Khreshchatyk Street, maybe 700-800 metres away, was the location of Klitschko's city government. Across the street was the Trade Unions Building, the burnt top of which Iti had photographed in the Maidan spring. Right behind them, a kilometre away, were Mariinskyi Park, the Ukrainian Parliament, and Zelensky's residence. Bombing this district would have meant a world war. Of course, the Kremlin could have been set on fire in retaliation.

'I wouldn't want to die for anything,' Tom said.

'Me neither,' said Rainer.

'Oh, by the way' said Iti, Terevisioon called. Do we want to talk about our trip tomorrow morning at 7.50 a.m. On Skype.'

'Oh, right. But we have to leave for, um, Chernihiv at 7.30 a.m.'

'Well, that's a bummer. I won't be coming then. Kuku Raadio rang too, they want an interview as well.'

'You'll miss the event completely then.'

'Well, a promo for a big event.'

The person from the network had suggested that either Iti or another of them could talk. Which of them could? Well, Teele Sibul comes across very convincingly in the media? Hm, does she really? Iti had promised to check with her colleagues, and then ten minutes later, having had a shower, sent a message that in any case, she had to take on the responsibility. To perform, to perform herself, to keep her head high in front of the camera, if at all possible. It was a habit of hers she couldn't stand. She felt awfully sorry about the school in Chernihiv, a city that had been razed to the ground.

In the old days, poets had been hungry, they ate the last of your tinned goods and stale olives and drank, drank, drank.

'Yes, and you'll have to perform for the children without me. But today we've basically got a day off!'

Musafir, the Crimean Tatar restaurant that the PEN people had recommended, was packed almost to bursting. People stepping in from the cold twilight had to wait ten minutes for a table. The Crimean Tatar theme was the draw. They did lentil soup, dumplings called *manti* with potatoes, lamb and chicken shashlik, a Genghis Khan kebab and meat salad with coriander. Again, Iti wondered at how little her colleagues ate. In the old days, poets had been hungry, they ate

the last of your tinned goods and stale olives and drank, drank, drank. Now Iti, who had only ordered lentil soup and chicken shashlik herself, had to eat half of Sanna's lamb shashlik, a quarter of Teele's potato dumplings, and one of Genghis Khan's kebab rolls. Only Tom finished his bidet, no, *pide*, a massive meat pie, all by himself. Iti looked at him appreciatively, like a good person who responded to the world with gusto. The food was very nice, and the Kolonist wine went well with it.

'You know what, I feel like a well-fed bird that can no longer get out of the birdhouse,' Iti said.

St Volodymyr's Cathedral,  
the big Hilton glowing blue. Was  
that where the EU Parliament  
delegates stayed?

'I reckon you'll manage,' Rainer said.

'If I do, I'll circle around the city and not immediately head back to the hotel. There is still time until the air alert.'

'Air alert?'

'Fuck, I meant curfew. You can't tell if there'll be an air alert.'

'You can. It'll happen,' said Sanna.

And they all walked on, along Bohdan Khmelnytsky Street towards the beige-and-green opera house, looking at the posters, *Carmen*, *La Sylphide*, *Le Corsair*. I wonder what kind of opera *Natalka Poltavka* is, Mykola Lysenko? But they'll have already left Kyiv by then.

Seeing Ivan Franko Street, they turned on to it, not knowing what awaited them there. It led to Shevchenko Boulevard.

'Poets on the Poets' Boulevard,' said Iti.

'Yay!' said Rainer.

'Who knows, maybe one of you will get your own street one day,' said Tom.

'Oh definitely,' said Sanna.

St Volodymyr's Cathedral, the big Hilton glowing blue. Was that where the EU Parliament delegates stayed?

'We're 2.8 kilometres from the hotel, I checked,' said Sanna.

'Not far then,' said Iti. 'Wait, let's turn on to this street. I wanted to take a look, I think you can see ... You can see the station from here, yes.'

'Symon Petliura, who was he?' asked Rainer.

'Um, a Cossack?'

But just there, on the right side of the road, the nose of a red-and-white car looked out from the side of a house. A two-tone car, optimistically cubic.

'Caribbean Club, ooh, get that!'

'You heard of it?'

'No, but look: Night Club! The ice is starting to shift!'

Well, well, Astor Piazzolla's 'Libertango'.

Pa-ram-pam-pam-pam-parap!

Iti hummed loudly; Rainer nodded in time.

Tom returned from the bar with a bottle of red wine, mmm, Odessa Black. He was followed by a waiter bearing a tray with five glasses.

'Oh my, people have certainly dressed up,' said Sanna.

Yes. They had, at least some of them. Little red dress, black suit. Some even had simply a white sweatshirt or a striped sailor's shirt. The women, though, all wore skirts or dresses.

'Well, *бyдeмo!* Cheers!' Iti shouted and raised her glass.

Cheers! Cheers! Kumbaya!

A few curious glances from the tables beside them. At least a few.

The Piazzolla came to an end and the dancers stopped.

'Oh, listen, yeah!' Iti moved her wine glass carefully to the rhythm of the tango. 'This is the mother of all tangos. At least to the uninitiated!'

'Only girls in jazz?' asked Tom.

'“La Cumparsita”,' said Teele softly.

'Wow, you actually know! You know the names!'

'Go and dance, then,' Sanna muttered wryly.

'I did quite enough dancing as a kid, I'm not doing any more,' said Teele.

'If you snooze, you'll lose out on the tunes!' said Iti. 'Rainer! Would you dance with the bride?'



‘No, I can’t. The people over there look like complete ... experts?’

‘The honour of our table must be saved! Rainer! Tom! Sanna!’

Rainer shook his head.

Iti got up, strode like a semi-lunatic up to Tom and bowed like a small boy at a school dance.

Yam-pam-pamp-pam.

‘Oh, you two are crazy!’ Sanna shook her head.

Yeah! Pam-pam-pam-pam, parapa-para! Yam-pam-pam-pam!

Neither of them could dance tango. They turned their heads with a theatrical stiffness, yam-pam, and moved, hands stretched out ready to attack, across the floor. They descended from one knee to the next, slid their feet along the parquet, with a large arch. Iti was surprised at how nonchalant and flexible her dance partner was, an intelligent man who let himself be led. Not that Iti had any way of leading the whole thing other than farcically.

She began to enjoy the situation. Tom’s warm back under her hand. A warm, living hand, now under her paw, but otherwise, morally, not her territory at all, ahh. She put her hand more tightly around her partner, drawing their bodies together, it was irony, an ironic tightness.

Real hormonal food. Who could have seen that coming!

No one, that’s who, but here it was now: a warm, new body against her, sparking her imagination.

And Iti thought about how chaste her imaginings had been all her life! She used to think about the man’s back, shoulders, cheekbones, and neck. What about his dick, how often did she think about that when she’d been having fun with someone? Very little, very little indeed! Shoulders, hands, hips, thighs, smell, eyes, but the dick, well, no. How much did she visualise it and how much was in her imagination as tactile, haptic? Lust, lust, lust, yet so fucking chaste!

At that moment, Tom twisted himself free and turned under Iti’s arm.

‘Lost the plot!’ Sanna murmured. She shook her head, laughed, and shook her head again.

Wham! Tom collided with a couple, oh yes, the little red dress and the dark-haired guy in the black suit. Didn’t make a face, just pulled away. Iti took a dramatic step backwards, and now it was her turn to bump into a couple. ‘Mm, sorry. *Вибачте*.’

Some of the dancers slowed down and stopped to look, some kept on dancing as if nothing had happened.

It suddenly dawned on Iti that all the others there were really dedicated, flashing with their legs, swish swish, watch, watch. Well, whatever. We have our own vision of tango!

Her upper body tilted backwards as if she were going to make a bridge. Her body walking back and forth in a circle. Going full punk. Another tango had already started playing, it was no longer ‘La Cumparsita’. Tom giggled and slightly imitated the movement by arching his upper body, albeit to a much lesser extent. Nothing connects people more than a stupid dance! Iti took a decisive long step towards Tom, and she landed on the toes of a dancer in a sailor shirt. The couple looked at them as if they were Martians. Iti shrugged her shoulders in a tango rhythm. Whatever, we’re skanking, we’re robots, everyone has the right to dance for fun! She rushed dramatically to their table, put a long, foamy spoon between her teeth, with which someone (Rainer?) must have stirred their latte, and tried to pass the spoon to Tom with her mouth. The spoon fell on the floor; a blonde girl gave a jump. Iti once again took on a more intimate pose with Tom and wanted to trample with him across the stage at a belligerent pace, when a woman, a skinny creature with dark-red hair, maybe ten years older than Iti, approached them in high heels.

Her upper body tilted backwards as if she were going to make a bridge. Her body walking back and forth in a circle. Going full punk.

‘Excuse me! Excuse me.’

She tapped Iti on the shoulder.

‘I’m sorry, but this is a tango evening. I need people to stay in the logic of tango.’

Several couples had stopped dancing, but a few carried on.

‘Okay, okay, okay’ Iti smiled at the woman. ‘Okay, *Вибачте нас, ми не уміємо... не вміємо танцювати*. Excuse us, we can’t, we can’t dance.’ She began sniggering helplessly, ‘I can’t dance, you know, like Phil Collins once sang. I can’t dance! Sorry, really.’

‘Didn’t want to ruin your evening,’ said Tom.

The woman nodded. Iti raised a hand in farewell, and they returned to their table.

‘Oh you Judas, heh heh.’

‘You two were totally crazy,’ Sanna shook her head.

‘And so what.’

‘They’re offended. Hey, maybe they’re right, I might have been, too, in their shoes. Some slutty people came in.’

‘Being slutty can be very agreeable,’ said Tom, and Iti flashed a glance at him.

‘Oh well,’ she said, ‘we’re alive. But we didn’t make anyone else look stupid, just ourselves.’

Teele said, ‘I’ve also been thinking about this kind of dance. I was forced to do folk dancing when I was a kid. Otherwise, none of us, and maybe not me either, can dance like that any more. Even so, we can go and make some moves.’

‘Dance belongs to the people!’

‘Yes, dance belongs to everyone. Like words or sounds. But when I see someone who’s really good at dancing, I wonder, do good dancers feel like the people who are flailing around cluelessly are like someone bashing piano keys? That it’s absolutely unbearable?’

Somehow, it seemed odd for a man in Ukraine in a sailor shirt to be holding wine rather than beer. But then it was tango after all.

‘Don’t people have the right to be an amateur? Where can you be an amateur in a democratic world?’

‘It was creative dance, you know,’ Tom said. ‘Freestyle.’

‘No, but it’s like when someone comes onstage to read a poem,’ said Sanna, ‘someone who’s a total enthusiast, and then just won’t leave. We also think it spoils the whole event, don’t we!’

‘Oh, I don’t know,’ Rainer said and squinted analytically.

‘There is a cabbage without hair!’ Iti quoted in a hollow voice, at which Tom sneered, and Iti waved him away. In the meantime, the others had almost finished their wine, and Iti emptied the final drops in her glass.

‘Hello. Where are you from?’

A man in a sailor shirt stood at their table holding a wine glass. Somehow, it seemed odd for a man in Ukraine in a sailor shirt to be holding wine rather than beer. But then it was tango after all. The man asked if he could join them.

‘Oh, Estonia, Estonians are tough. You’re awesome.’

The poets smiled.

‘Дякую, дякую, thank you, you’re awesome.’ Iti raised her almost-empty

glass, at which the man went and got a new bottle, even though it was already 10.30 p.m.

‘We have tango evenings here,’ he said. ‘Every month. People come, practise. Take courses, and some practise at home with YouTube. It’s a big thing for us.’

‘Yes, yes, of course.’

‘Sorry that we messed things up with our freestyling,’ Tom said.

The man waved it away. ‘Oh, no problem.’

Iti tried to decide how old he was. Fifty-two, -three, -five? Definitely under sixty. Not on the front line, danced tango, and drank wine. Important job, large family, sole carer of sick parents? A health issue that wasn’t visible?

Where did this stupid habit come from of wondering why a man is not on the front line. It’s stupid.

His name was Danylo and he was head of purchasing at a fruit company. And what were they doing in Kyiv? Well, they were poets, what could you do?

‘Yes, we are, apart from him,’ said Sanna, yanking Tom’s wrist.

‘Oh, poets, nearly all of you! And I thought you were on vacation in Kyiv, it’s a comfortable place to rest, isn’t it? But really, it’s powerful that you’re here, we appreciate it. We appreciate it.’

‘Seeing as we don’t dance tango,’ said Tom.

A very dainty girl in a dark-blue dress came up to Danylo. She was like a model. Olena. Olena said they needed to leave; they had a long way to go. She was about to take a taxi. She said it first in Ukrainian, then in English. Olena was another of these beautiful people. Why are people so beautiful? Iti looked at Tom, Sanna was now holding her brother around the shoulders.

‘Oh, so you’re going to Chernihiv tomorrow, very good,’ Danylo said.

‘I’m not,’ said Iti. Unfortunately, I’ve got to do a TV interview at some godawful hour – basically at dawn.’

‘We’re leaving crazy early too,’ said Sanna.

‘This place is about to close,’ Olena said. ‘Most places close at eleven, so that people get home by the midnight curfew.’

Almost as soon as they were outside, the sirens went off.

‘Your overconfidence is your weakness,’ Mark Hamill said on the telephone.





Oskar Kallis (1892–1918)  
**Kiss of Sun**  
 Pastel on paper, 1917  
 Art Museum of Estonia

The roaming was still on.

‘The usual evening routine,’ Danylo said. ‘Are you already used to it?’

Although the traffic had thinned out, the cars that were there drove fast. Very fast.

‘You won’t all fit in one taxi,’ Danylo commented, and Iti offered to walk, it was about two kilometres, and the drones wouldn’t strike Khreshchatyk. But the girls had already ordered two taxis, and she was put in a Mitsubishi with Rainer.

Again, people were taking mattresses and blankets down into the cellar.

‘Right.’ Iti stood at the bar, deciding what to buy with her cash – now the only option – another glass of wine or just a bottle of water.

‘Quite right, that’s what upstanding citizens do.’

‘You’re still sleeping upstairs, right?’

‘Well, yes, to be honest. I want to rest properly, as I have to look more or less presentable tomorrow. The computer camera could make me look like a complete Chomsky if I flake out.’

‘Eh?’

‘A zombie. One water, please!’

She opened the Morshynska bottle. If she kept drinking wine, she’d definitely be a Chomsky.

Sanna nodded. ‘It’s actually good that the likes of us can’t do the nightlife properly. Good for the gods of health!’

‘I’ve thought that too,’ said Iti. ‘The massive plus of curfews. If I could just apply it to myself back home.’

‘But we’ll see each other at breakfast tomorrow?’

Teele had headphones around her neck and a white blanket under one arm.

‘Yeah, I’ll try and be there. You’re setting off about the same time as I have that silly interview.’

The lift was working, even though it shouldn’t have been; you weren’t allowed to use the lift during air alerts. The thought didn’t cross her mind until she’d reached the tenth floor.

She opened the balcony door once more; outside was blue and cold, St Sophia's Cathedral was still illuminated. She stepped on to the balcony, which sloped outwards slightly, looking at the quiet Maidan. No anti-aircraft guns could be heard.

Take a melatonin, long-acting, and be up right on time for a quarter to eight.

But sleep didn't seem to want to come between the white sheets. She thought about how that warm shirt had felt under her hands. What kind of fabric was it? Something very smooth. The warmth and sinews that lay underneath it.

She should have been thinking through tomorrow's interview, as interviews only succeed when you say what you want to say rather than answering the journalist's questions. But she slid her hand over her body. *Uwaga*. Your overconfidence is your weakness.

Damn! No time left to eat now, so what can she do? Maybe she can get herself something in between the two interviews. The others have already left. Argh, twenty minutes,

brushing her teeth while taking a dump, hair wash, the sachet of hotel shampoo won't open, gah, fuck, well, dry hair, now clothes, clothes!

But what kind of clothes? A khaki shirt to echo Zelenskyy? An intellectual black jumper with a rollneck? A burgundy jacket on top of a khaki shirt to make a more respectable impression? She took the Ukrainian Defence Forces' supporter badge off her jumper, put it on the jacket, took it off. Pinned the light-blue brooch of PEN Ukraine on the jacket instead, took it off. Let's have a flag, then. Blue-yellow and blue-black-white, from the market for three euros. She stuck the metal badge on the jumper, took it off. That left a khaki shirt without a jacket, and with the PEN badge.

When appearing on screen, you need to make some kind of effort for it to work. Make sure your face doesn't shine. The camera turns a human into a mummy anyway.

Interview, oh, interview, why do you always leave that hangover taste in my mouth? And as always, the way it's been her whole life, feeling like she's pathetically throwing out the ballast: anxious, abundant ballast. Speak slower, she tells herself, you don't even know what to say; think, but don't say, maybe the conversation would be more human that way. But she had to babble on like a fool. She needed to show that, um, hopefully, we also have something to say in this context, our experience is quite different: we're coddled, the world's failure is hypothetical for us, but they experience it here every day. She had also tried to do a live reality-performance: do you hear the sirens? The air-raid alarm just ended, and now another one. A proper bang went off just now, as if a huge gong had been beaten. Did you hear that? Not much could be heard at

the other end of the Skype call, and running to the balcony with a computer would have been too dramatic. Interview, oh interview, why should you succeed at all?

The piece with Kuku Raadio turned out better, though, because her voice had already grunted its way awake and between the two interviews, she had also managed to sleep for an hour and a half. She had sacrificed breakfast to sink into a therapeutic stupor, half-asleep, half-awake, thinking about yesterday's dance. By now, the marinated tomatoes had long been cleared away.

But sushi. Once upon a time, there were a lot of sushi places around here, you know, maybe there still were. That was what she was going to go and eat now, cream cheese sushi, with no one to see. A hybrid with baked salmon that the Japanese wouldn't consider sushi. She deserved a little time to eat after her half-celebratory interviews.

She put on her black woollen sweater, threw a coat on top, and was just opening the hotel room door when the phone rang. A Ukrainian number.

'Yes, hello?'

A male voice asked in English if she was Iti H.

'Yes.'

He said he was calling from Your Driver Company and asked where she was now.

'Ah, well, I'm at the hotel still, Hotel Ukraina.'

'Right, you weren't on the excursion.'

He said he had very bad news. Dreadful news. It was already on TV, had Iti not seen? Their Mercedes had been struck by a missile.

'That's impossible,' Iti said blankly.

'Unfortunately not,' he said.

'What? Er ...'

'An Iskander, apparently.'

'Where?' Iti asked.

'Not that far away from where you are. On the border with Lukyanivka. The police will be in touch with you.'

'I' Iti stammered, 'I – was your driver killed, I'm sorry to hear that, I –'



She didn't understand whether he broke off the call or she herself pulled away.

It was impossible, it was such a small miscalculation that it had to be rewound somehow. She picked up the TV remote. Kyiv was on the news: the fire department, people in hi-vis vests, a deep hole in the asphalt, and the entrance to the metro station caved in. Could that grey ruin have been the glossy black Merc a few hours ago? She couldn't see Teele's Eskimo boots anywhere.

One, two, three, four. When she opened her eyes again, the world was the same. A room with dark red flooring and a pseudo-baroque chair.

She dialled Tom's number. 'This number is not in use.' What the fucking hell.

Before she had time to ring Sanna's number, the phone began vibrating, a call from an unknown number. A police officer began talking in formal English.

She slammed her fist against the wall and knew that she needed to scream now, right now, it was right that she screamed like an animal. She even opened her jaws wide: four-sided, hideous. Then she shut her mouth again. She closed her eyes and counted to four, maybe four seconds. One, two, three, four. When she opened her eyes again, the world was the same. A room with dark-red flooring and a pseudo-baroque chair. The world has the ability not to restore itself to the default settings. It was all fucked up.

Her phone vibrated again. An unknown number from Estonia. Listlessly, she tapped the green symbol.

'Hello, is that Iti H? I'm calling from *Aktuaalne Kaamera*.'

Finger on the red dot. She'd go to the site. The sun had come out; the wings on the angel figure were gleaming.

The phone rang again and Iti picked up.

'Hello? Are you listening? It's me from *Aktuaalne Kaamera* here still.'

'Yes,' said Iti and cleared her throat. 'I think you were cut off just now.' ■



Eduard Wiiralt (1898 - 1954)  
**Cabaret** (fragment)  
 Etching, copper engraving, 1931  
 Art Museum of Estonia

Friedebert Tuglas  
Short Story Award  
Laureate 2025

# INTO THE SILENCE

by BRIGITTA DAVIDJANTS

Translated by Slade Carter

BRIGITTA DAVIDJANTS (b. 1983) is a prose writer, as well as a musicologist, researcher, music journalist, and lecturer, who also plays in a band. In her academic work, she has explored Armenian national identity formations, while her present focus lies on subcultural marginalities. Her 2025 collection *Explosion at the Gum Kiosk and Other Stories* resembles a short novel composed of interconnected stories. Davidjants is also the author of *J.M.K.E.'s To The Cold Land* (Bloomsbury, 2025), an English-language study of Estonian punk centred on the band's seminal album *Külmale maale*.





*Like an earthquake, I think. And I am petrified right there in bed – the room is unfamiliar. Completely unfamiliar. There is a carpet on the wall. Red, with patterns. There is also a carpet on the other wall. And on the floor.*

*I carefully get out of bed, move slowly towards the balcony door, and the closer I get, the clearer the sounds become. Now I'm starting to tell them apart. The car alarm, the screeching of tyres, a foreign language, someone screaming and probably someone crying.*

*On the other side of the door, I'm hit by a hot, dry heat. I carefully take myself to the balcony and take a look. Pink houses, made of great stones, right in front of an expansive park. I see a policeman wielding a baton. A desert-coloured mountain, with snow on top. The mountain is beautiful, both near and far in its size. Clutching onto the balcony railing, I look at the mountain. I look at a man running along the main square. The noise is deafening. The man screams, even shouts: Azatutyun! A tricolour is flying in his hand.*

*I stand for several minutes, and after that I simply go back into the room.*

And then I wake up.

It haunts. At first, just a dream, but now all it takes is to close my eyes for a moment, and I almost believe I am back there. Dreams have a way of continuing. As with all my daily activities – I end up visiting the same places and seeing the same people, walking the same path day after day, going to the kitchen in the morning to make coffee and cook for the children, then to work and the ten thousand steps home, then the children and their homework. It is the same with dreams. Here I am again, in an apartment that reminds me of the home I once lived in, with the red patterns on the wall-carpet and the smell of fresh bread and coffee coming from the courtyard, and the noise that takes my thoughts to the earthquake. And in the main square, people flushed with victory.

'Stop daydreaming,' Ivar interrupts my train of thought. I know that the sharp tone is deceptive. It's me who scares him when I get distracted and stare into the void.

Sometimes I think I should tell him about my dreams, but I don't bother. There is no point, other people's dreams are always so confusing and boring. 'You've switched off again, and you can't hear what I'm saying. It's like you're not even here.'

Like in *Krabat*, I think to myself.<sup>2</sup>

Ivar sometimes says that I don't know how to delve deeply. That I am impatient. I don't know how to play with the children on the floor, I'm always trying to do something useful with my other hand.

'Like in *Krabat*?' I now ask. But Ivar just mumbles uncertainly because he hasn't read the book.

Thinking of *Krabat* again, and I am child once more, thirty-five years have gone by in the blink of an eye. I remember exactly how it was when I read it and the pungent sweet smell when Grandma cooked jam in the kitchen. I find myself in trouble when reminiscing. Random scents, colours – and everything comes back. The injustice in the third grade at school that still takes my breath away. My classmate's mum tearing into me because I got in her way on the class excursion, and the form teacher simply looking on. At other times I recollect something positive. I run through the woods, so the branches hit my face, I feel the twigs breaking underfoot, but I reach my goal: 'Olly olly oxen free!'

*Perhaps the thing is that coffee is associated with freedom? With youth? With the time I had no idea of the existence of Ivar, not to mention three children.*

'What are you thinking about?'

'That I am tired.'

I take a big glug of coffee, even though I shouldn't. It's the third this morning. The first two I downed when taking the children to nursery and school – and I know my heart will start pounding now.

Besides, coffee doesn't taste half as good as it did since I started drinking it without sugar.

When the twins were born, it was coffee that gave life meaning. Sometimes I'd go to bed at night and the thought of coffee in the morning excited me with such anticipation that I couldn't sleep.

Perhaps the thing is that coffee is associated with freedom? With youth? With the time I had no idea of the existence of Ivar, not to mention three children. Or a job with responsibilities and a massive mortgage on an apartment.

Instead, I was an exchange student in Armenia, discovering my ancestral roots. The coffee was black and strong, deliciously bitter and loaded with sugar. Sometimes I try to brew it here in the same way, but it doesn't work. The coffee beans are too coarse. I have bought three coffee mills, but none will grind the beans fine enough, no matter what the shop promises.

<sup>2</sup> *Krabat*: 1971 children's fantasy novel by German writer Otfried Preussler. Set in the eighteenth century, it is a tale of a young apprentice, Krabat, who acquires magic powers.



*It took fifteen minutes to walk to Yerevan University and only five minutes on a marshrutka.<sup>3</sup> 'Ah, that's our studentka! You made it! That's the call of the roots,' the lady with purple hair nodded. And I nodded excitedly along.*

*'We'll draw up a lesson timetable for you right away,' said the woman. 'I'm Irina Armanovna,' she introduced herself. 'Do you have a fiancé?' she asked. 'No? Too young. Don't worry, we'll find you one here!'*

*'What are you thinking about, seriously?' Now I finally look at Ivar: 'I wonder when it gets easier. Nora and Mark are five. Soon to be six. Stefan is twelve. And most mornings, I feel like I'm going to die. Running from the first moment, the endless screaming and demands.'*

*'They're starting school next autumn,' Ivar says at last, as if that should console me.*

*As if that will make things any easier, I think. They will start coming home even earlier.*

*It was a fractious start to the morning. At first, Mark didn't want to get out of bed. Then to go to the nursery. Then to brush his teeth. When he finally got to the bathroom and found his sister there, he felt the need to take the cuddly toy out of her hand. Nora, already upset, dishevelled and sleepy, added a full-throated scream.*

*'Please! Don't do that! The neighbours can hear!' I ran from the kitchen where I was making Stefan's sandwich. Finally, I hauled Mark into the kitchen with me. 'Rice porridge!' he shouted at the scent of oats.*

*And there he was, thrashing about on the floor, wearing his little shirt and no pants. I threw, as a last resort, rice flakes into the pot, without hearing that Nora had been begging about something in my ear for a while, only noticing Stefan's hands tightening into a fist at the screaming – he tolerates noise as badly as I do.*

*'Why don't you put that song on?' Nora's existence suddenly reached my consciousness.*

*'Which song?'*

*'The one we listened to in the countryside.'*

*Which song?*

*Someone was talking about a triathlon on the radio, and I had no idea what that might be. The speakers' voices mingled with the howling of the children. While I was just standing there with my heart pounding, Stefan crept up and attached himself to my neck. Stefan is my height, and his hug is limp and heavy. As if someone has hung a bag of flour around my neck. The last thing I want at a time like this is someone touching*

<sup>3</sup> A privately operated shared minibus, common in many former Soviet countries.



Oskar Kallis (1892–1918)

# Silence

Pastel on cardboard, 1917

Art Museum of Estonia

me. I also know I shouldn't say anything to him because it is his way of comforting me. Of being supportive.

Except that he is not.

I pushed him for a moment, as gently but as forcefully as possible, and released myself from his embrace. And I felt the flow of different sounds directing my vision according to where the ruckus was coming from.

'What are you waiting for?' Ivar asks me now. 'For them to be silent or not to move? They are children. And there are three of them. Of course they are noisy.'

*It was noisy in Armenia, just like in the dream I have. But it didn't bother me. I was younger. And the noise didn't affect me. Like contemporary symphonic music, organically swelling and fading, before gaining momentum again.*

'I'm going to work,' I tell Ivar, who is already behind the computer, meticulously programming something. I wrap a scarf around my neck and leave, taking a longer route. I don't want to get to the office too soon. These twenty minutes are mine. Straight down Kunderi Street, through Police Park, past the front of the department store, and over Freedom Square. I think about putting on Gasparyan playing the duduk – to extend my dreamlike feelings – but I abandon the idea at the last minute and instead play some new postpunk on Spotify. It anchors me to reality. Connects with young people who wear the same kind of clothes that I used to wear when I was their age long ago.

*But when I notice my reflection in the glass door of the beauty salon, I see the dark circles under my eyes, a poorly kept fringe, and slightly swollen cheeks.*

The drum beat hammers in my ears, and it seems to me that I'm as cool as the music. But when I notice my reflection in the glass door of the beauty salon, I see the dark circles under my eyes, a poorly kept fringe, and slightly swollen cheeks. The illusion disappears in an instant.

Who am I kidding? Of course I'm different from them. And they all know that.

It's warm in Armenia. The sun is shining Armenia. There is no seasonal depression in Armenia. Armenia has good food, with a pure taste and no e-numbers. And the music that envelops you in its own timeless stream.

I'm not different in Armenia, I thought as I was going there.

\*

I am fifteen minutes late for work. No one seems to have noticed. I throw my handbag under a desk and I feel my cheeks flare. The same crap every spring, allergies make my face swell and turn red.

There are dozens of us in the company, a typical modern office where everyone works in one open space; no one has their own desk, let alone a set of drawers. If anyone wants anything, they shout across the room. It is our office policy that we talk to people, not to chat online or text. 'The human touch,' says our boss. 'Like in the old days.' Except in the old days, people didn't sit together in a big barn, they sat in cubicles, and the doors were closed. If someone wanted to come in, they knocked. Our solution should be modern, back to people and back to basics, but deep down I hate it, because every cry and outburst is accompanied by a break in my thought process.

'The next software development meeting will be in Baku,' the boss says straight off when he sees me. We have branches all over the world, ideas flying over the net, and innovation teams in major cities from Europe to the Middle East. The boss is younger than me, talkative and unpredictable. He gets some idea in his head, conveys it in a mixture of Estonian and English, and expects us to fly with it.

'You will represent our team. The trip is next month.'

Is he joking?

*'Are you kidding? You can't go to Baku,' Aram looked at me as if I was a little stupid. We met at university. He studied history, while I was studying information technology. 'You will be killed, you have an Armenian name.' My cheeks began to flush with shame.*

'I can't go to Baku,' I tell the boss. 'Send Zahra, she's from there.'

We have an international team – there are Estonians, Italians, one Azerbaijani, one Portuguese and a whole bunch of Russians and Ukrainians.

The boss looks at me with a face that clearly says – so what?

'I am Armenian. We had a war. They hate us.'

'You're not being overly overdramatic? This is an international meeting. What do you think will happen?'

'Armenians are not safe in Baku. I would be very happy to go to Baku, honestly. My grandmother comes from there and lived there until she became a war refugee. Seriously, what do I have to prove now?'

And at the same time, I realize that I have gone too far, my voice is shrill. Not that I wouldn't want to go to Baku.



*Another recurring nightmare. The border is formed here, as if someone had taken a black marker and drawn a random line across the paper. I am in the ordinary, sweet-smelling Estonian pine forest. I know if I go straight, I'll reach Azerbaijan. Which is what I want – to see the place that could also be my home. For even ten minutes, to see the place where my family lived for centuries.*

*I keep on walking.*

*And out of the forest I find myself heading straight to the big oil city of Baku, a far cry from pink, dry, rocky Yerevan. The grand white marble homes, the old majestic opera houses with glass skyscrapers, donkeys and Mercedeses, the suffocating heat and the sea air. Women with straightened noses and men in pressed Armani suits, making their way among the beggars.*

*I've got ten minutes, and then I see her. On the periphery between the city and the forest, there is a little girl with long black plaits. Is she five? Or six? She looks like the woman I had seen in my childhood in the ENEKE<sup>4</sup> encyclopaedias showing the traditional dress of different nationalities. Dreams are fucking clichés. But I am collecting myself, because what is an Armenian girl doing alone in Azerbaijan? I extend my hand to her, she takes it, to lead her back to the pine forest, back to Armenia, to safety. But each time, the dream fades the moment we reach the edge of the forest. And I wake up with an agonising feeling.*

'That's clear then, Zahra will go. We'll connect you on Zoom,' says the boss. 'Please talk through how this is going to work!' I nod and sit at my station.

Zahra has already dragged her chair to my desk and is scribbling something in her notes. She looks like a princess from the Arab world, big dark-brown eyes and long eyelashes like in a fairy tale, dark curls down to her hips. Black, not brown like me. She's got a resonating laugh, and she is tiny and cute, a little doll. And she thinks it's infinitely terrific that we both have Caucasian roots. Not so in my opinion; my great-grandmother fled the genocide in what is now Turkey, the Ottoman Empire, in 1915, in which one and a half million Armenians were killed. Including my grandmother's family. And what on earth is this forcing the Armenians of Karabakh to flee other than genocide by other means, I think in my head.

Once I talked about it in the coffee nook, after we had worked together for a year.

'It was a war, everyone escaped,' Zahra replied. 'Not just you.' – 'Did your family also? What did they escape from?' I asked in reply, the irony hidden in my voice. – 'We have been here for three generations,' she smiled at me. 'My great-grandmother came here during the Russian-Turkish War; she always said she had escaped with her lover from the Sultan's harem.'

'My great-grandmother arrived in Baku from western Armenia at the turn of the

century. Because of the genocide,' I answered laconically. I couldn't help but add, 'She was the only one of her family to survive. Everyone else was killed. Killed on the spot by the Sultan's soldiers, dying in the Syrian desert. I'm not sure we can compare the systematic destruction of a people to harem adventures. Or my grandmother, who thirty years ago had to flee her home again, this time to Estonia.' – 'Believe me, the harem is only fun in a fairy tale. And men are men, whether they are Azerbaijanis or Turks or Armenians or Estonians or Russians,' Zahra replied with a laugh. 'I'd like to see what your Armenian men would have done in the last war if they had got hold of an Azerbaijani girl.'

How can I explain to her how I felt when my grandmother told me about her mother? How she was found wandering alone in the desert, speaking a few words of Armenian. I imagined a caravan of people in the Syrian desert, and a child who had become lost on the road. I thought of my grandmother, who lost her home at the end of the Soviet era, had to leave Baku, where she had grown up, married, raised her children – and I felt anger towards Zahra. That she trivializes my pain. My grandmother and great-grandmother's story. To compare the destruction of generations to the romance of the fairy tale *One Thousand and One Nights*.

*I couldn't help but add, 'She was the only one of her family to survive. Everyone else was killed.'*

The phone on Zahra's desk rings and she runs to pick it up. In a moment, I will hear her sonorous voice. I look at her coffee mug and momentarily think about spitting in it. Not that Zahra is evil, but just as a punishment for her ignorance. But I start to worry about cameras and hold back.

\*

*The journey from Tallinn to the centre of Yerevan, from there to the pine forest, and from there directly to the chaotic traffic of Baku takes seconds in my dream.*

*You can reach Yerevan via Lai Street, slipping under the archway that should lead to Suur-Kloostri Street, although it has been firmly locked behind a gate and padlock since the beginning of the new century. Ah, that's why they locked it up, I realize in my dream. Because when I enter, I will be right on the main square. And just like that I find myself out of the quiet grey dimness of the old town, in the midst of squint-inducing sunlight, police whistles and honking cars. Pink tuff buildings tower over me, while the newlyweds keep circling the square in their cars. Between the Volgas, a man trundles up in an open ice cream van, a cap on his head, his stomach spilling over his trousers. The van is decorated with a laughing face on an ice cream cone, the paint peeling off. I look at the people and think of the silent Armenian girl who was left behind on the border between the pine forest and Baku. Where did her parents go? Is she not speaking because she fears they will understand?*

The radio is playing. The TV is playing. Stefan's tablet is playing. The children are playing. Ivar is watching football with a friend who is on a Skype speaker. Every sound

<sup>4</sup> ENEKE was a set of encyclopaedias aimed at children and a general readership, published in 1982–6 during the Soviet occupation of Estonia.



penetrates my brain separately. Like a thousand different lines, and I don't know which one to focus on, which one to listen to.

'Turn it down,' I bark, making borscht in the kitchen. I don't even know what they are supposed to turn down. If I closed my eyes now, I'd be back in the forest.

You know what Hitler said when he started sending Jews to the gas chamber? That no one remembers the Armenians.

The first time Grandma saw such a thick forest was in Estonia. In Baku, she had grape vines and apricot trees. Sometimes neighbourhood children would come and steal from her. 'Why would they sell unripe apricots?' Grandma asked the first time we

went to the Central Market together to get food. By that time, she had been living with us for a week, and I still felt reserved around her. 'It's a different kind,' Mum tried to convince Grandma, but Grandma shook her head doubtfully. Later, at home, she made cabbage rolls with minced meat, and the whole kitchen was filled with a strange, sour smell. Mum ate and said it was good. And later she said to Dad – Look what the war has done, this is poor people's food, *Mama* used to despise it. These should be stuffed aubergines and Bulgarian pepper, tomato and vine leaves. Not cabbage.

'You'll never guess what happened to us at school today,' Stefan interrupts my thoughts.

'The Year 12 students gave us a German lesson, and at the start we watched some sort of march, then Hitler's speech, and then the whole class made that hand gesture.'

What gesture? You mean *Sieg Heil*?

'Are you kidding me? And what did you do?' I'm freaking out and see by the look on Stefan's face that he knows that something went wrong. 'You don't do things like that! Not ever!'

'But we were only joking!'

'Things like that aren't funny! Were the Jews amused when they were sent to the gas chamber with Hitler's salute?'

Stefan runs to his room and throws himself on to the bed, a lump in his throat. And I know I was unfair. I should have explained. I go after him, sit on Stefan's bed and put my hand on his back.

'I'm sorry I yelled at you. It's just that genocide is a truly horrific thing. He looks at me, his lips quivering. 'We were just being ironic. About Hitler.' – 'Yes, but the irony is very difficult to understand from the outside. You know what Hitler said when he started sending Jews to the gas chamber? That no one remembers the Armenians. But your Armenian great-grandparents' parents also died in the genocide. All the more reason why you shouldn't joke about things like that. You understand how directly this affects you? You're an Armenian yourself and maybe the only reason you exist is because your

great-grandmother somehow managed to survive, by some miracle.'

He looks at me from under his light fringe, a little defiant, or so it seems to me. 'Yes, but I am Estonian.'

I want to argue with him, but then I give up. Indeed, who am I to say who he is?

It is already ten o'clock and the children are in bed. 'You shouldn't have yelled at them,' Ivar says. 'I know,' I answer. And then I feel the need to justify myself. 'But I just can't cope. They whine all the time, demanding something, shrieking and nagging. They are doing just fine, they get new toys every week and go to cafés to eat pasta. They can't imagine how scary things might be.' – 'Don't you realize how demagogical you are? You live in events from a hundred years ago,' Ivar snaps. 'But you have three children who need you – here and now. Do you really think you'd be happier without them?' Yes, I would be, I'd like to answer him, and I believe it myself. But I don't say anything, I just turn around and go to sleep.

\*

*I had a strange dream today. That I have three children and a husband. A big boy and two little ones, a girl and a boy. The big boy hugged me as if he were drowning, and as I held the smaller ones, I felt a tenderness I had never experienced before. I woke up, still feeling the warmth of the child's body and his weight against me and an overwhelming sense of regret that it was just a dream.*

I shake off my sleep and put my arm around the little girl. Lately, she's always with me when I wake. We must get to the darkness of the forest.

I wonder what her voice sounds like.

It seems impossible to get her out of Baku, but I will try. We are moving quietly through the thronging streets – two Armenian women – surrounded by big, dusky, sweaty, barking men. Where are all the women? I think. I can see the men are angry – in the way they scream, repeat the same words, chant. They are burning flags whose colours I can recognize even when they're scorched. I calculate our every move, the girl's warm hand firmly on my arm, afraid to walk too fast, and I feel a paralysing fear that they will notice us.

I calculate our every move, the girl's warm hand firmly on my arm, afraid to walk too fast, and I feel a paralysing fear that they will notice us.

We are on the edge of the city; one stride more, we step into the forest – and suddenly we're there, instantly. The air feels different. In a flash, the relentless humidity has disappeared, and dry air is scorching my arm. The new cars are gone. And people are strangely dressed. Like thirty years ago. We are on Yerevan's central square. A man, the tricolour on his shoulder, screams something. That we won, we showed them. Those

murderers and rapists, those Turkish animals, the Azerbaijanians.

We have no electricity, no food, the earth is trembling and shaking, but the most important thing is – we won.

‘Everything is fine,’ I whisper to her. ‘You can talk now.’ She looks at me and her lips hardly move.

*Bəli.*<sup>5</sup>

Not *ayo.*<sup>6</sup> Not *ha.*<sup>7</sup>

I go cold inside, I look around and I see endless men, not a single woman. Sweaty, yelling, big men with brown eyes. I restrain myself from putting my hand over her mouth. This is a little Azerbaijani girl.

We are moving with measured paces, going forward through the crowd, down the dusty street, and my heart is pounding because I’m afraid they will notice us.

The dry heat, the pink houses and mud, the oil spills, white buildings, the heat and the humidity, it all blends together. Armenian men, Azerbaijani men, I don’t know who’s who. Two women in the middle of shouting men.

We ascend the stairs; I nod to the old man next door in passing. I unlock the door, take the girl to the room, and I am exhausted all of a sudden. There are dark-red carpets on the walls and the floor. I can feel the shabby, rough fibres under my toes. ‘Do you want to sleep?’ I ask, and I think that maybe the dream will return, a warm and heavy child’s body against mine. She nods. I turn on the boiler in the bathroom to heat the water. I cook for us in the meantime. There isn’t anything besides lavash with herbs. I tie her long plaits into a bun. We undress and crawl under the shower into pitch darkness, because at that exact moment, the electricity is turned off, the daily limit has been reached. We empty the tank until there’s not a drop of hot water left. We dry ourselves with coarse terrycloth towel, so that our skin feels rough, and get into bed, between the sheets. Before that, I undo her hair, and her curls spread out across the pillow. I am so tired of the war, I miss my dream children so much. How can you miss someone who doesn’t exist? But if I fall asleep, the dream might come back. I reach for the girl, I smother her with cuddles, and we disappear into the silence together. ■

<sup>5</sup> ‘Yes’ in Azeri.

<sup>6</sup> ‘Yes’ in Armenian.

<sup>7</sup> ‘Yes’ in colloquial Armenian.



Konrad Mägi (1878–1925)  
Norwegian Landscape with Pine  
Oil on canvas, 1908–1910  
Art Museum of Estonia



by VAINO VAHING

# BLIND AND DEAF PLATES

Translated by Slade Carter

Eleven dinner plates and a few platters were already on the table, but the food had still not been brought. The women said that today they were making a stew that needed to be cooked on two stoves, and that the second stove, on which the potatoes were boiling, had not been drawing since the morning.

Sitting alone at a table laid with empty plates is not as awkward as two people sitting together. We were at our places, my nephew and I, and we discussed the weather and politics, but neither of us dared talk about the food. Yet time dragged on, and bread, salt and mustard, knives and forks were brought, but still no food.

I handed my nephew an empty platter.

‘Perhaps some meat?’

VAINO VAHING (1940–2008) was an Estonian psychiatrist, prose writer, playwright and actor, whose psychologically intense and autobiographical work made him a central figure of the sixties generation. Closely associated with Mati Unt, he explored psychoanalysis in both life and literature. His story “Pimedad ja kurdid taldrikud” (“Blind and Deaf Plates”) and his play about Jaan Oks, *Mees, kes ei mahu kivile* (*The Man Who Cannot Fit on a Rock*), appeared in the 1976 collection *Näitleja* (*Actor*). He was also a diarist and chronicler of his generation.



'I don't feel like meat ...'

I raised another empty platter towards him.

'Fried fish?'

'I don't want fish either ...'

'Let's start with potatoes then ...'

Having run out of platters, I handed him one of the plates. My nephew did not respond.

My nephew threw his fork down on to the table with deliberation; his entire half-hearted attempt at gameplay had dissipated.

'I can serve you, just say what you'd like.'

'Perhaps some potatoes.'

I used a fork and picked out some air potatoes and rolled three on to my nephew's plate. He thanked me.

'Go on, the potatoes are already quite cold ... they're starting to turn blue.'

'I don't care for plain potatoes ... It feels like something's missing.'

'Rye bread, white bread ... sauce? Of course, sauce!'

'Sauce, please.'

'Exactly, plenty of sauce, white and mild.'

The hostesses came from the kitchen to watch us. Neither they nor the strong kitchen smells disturbed us. My knife and fork clattered on the plate, as if I were eating hungrily ... jealously, gorging myself. But my nephew was waiting for something.

I marvelled at everything I had set before him for his prospective dinner. Why wasn't he eating? Was he being fussy?

'I am not being fussy, I just have no appetite,' he pre-empted me.

'No appetite? Appetite, appetite at an empty table, when air potatoes are on the menu!'

My nephew threw his fork down on to the table with deliberation; his entire half-hearted attempt at gameplay had dissipated.

'One of us ... one of us has to eat! Who? If you don't eat, then it must be me! One out of eleven, and I will eat, and when I am full I will get up from the table right

away, and I will start shouting. You, however, don't sit there scratching your chin or looking hungrily towards the kitchen! There is nothing there. You no longer know how to live, how to eat if there is nothing in the kitchen.'

And at last, my nephew began to talk.

'You know, I don't know how to eat these phantom ... feasts. Of course, I understand that you're not playing with me. I also know that tailors sewed garments of air for naked emperors, but I know nothing about eating like this ... And why would you, of all people, teach me to eat this way?'

'Enough! When your stomach is empty, then eating is all about you, the eater – what else is there to say about teaching? Can you teach an adult to eat?' I paused a little then continued.

'I am glad that I see everything differently, that I am not hungry to see everything in this world ...'

'What does seeing things differently mean?' my nephew fired back. 'Do you think I'm blind? That you are playing with a blind man? And ...'

'And if you were blind, I would still force you to eat, just like this. Someone has to be on my side. A selfless game has not and never will blind the sighted – quite the contrary.'

'But if I were a deaf-mute then ... would that be a capital offence?'

'Ah, so deaf-mutes can't be served a fantasy instead of potatoes? You can, sometimes you must – it is advisable ... A deaf-mute and a stew have something in common ...'

'Where have you experienced anything as atrocious as that?'

'In a prison camp ... And remember, in the camp such games were played only on blind people.'

'The beasts!'

'Maybe, but we no longer know who ... we only know that it was not the blind, definitely not them, because when a sighted person starved to death after such a table game, the blind were the ones who survived since they did not take part in the game. Some of them didn't even lose weight. They said that playing the empty table game – starving compared to blindness, compared to eternal darkness – was a trivial and passing thing, overcome by imagination alone, and that the day would come again when one can eat, but the blind will never see.'

'Why were you so unfair to the blind?'

And if you were blind, I would still force you to eat, just like this. Someone has to be on my side. A selfless game has not and never will blind the sighted – quite the contrary.

'You couldn't hit the blind; you would never raise your hand to them. They could either be killed or nourished by the game, only the bad ones, of course, even in the camp.'

I had gone too far, as if I had swallowed a big empty mouthful.

'Let's leave the deaf-mutes in peace today ... Dinner will be a little late, and the wishes and misfortunes of a couple of early diners are of no significance. But if you think I was playing a bad joke on you, then ...'

Don't argue. You are guilty because you did not take the empty plates and empty table game seriously.

I did not finish. I quickly grabbed an empty plate and smashed it against the tiled stove. My nephew sat looking on as though it were normal behaviour.

'Don't break the crockery ... don't break it for no reason.'

'I shall break it. All eleven plates will be smashed into pieces against the stove ... I hate plates, silent and empty. I'll get into trouble or will be denied food for the next few days, but right now I will smash the dishes. Completely sober, I will smash these empty dishes and expectant plates.'

'Do it then!'

And I hurled all eleven plates (incidentally, my nephew was eleven years younger than I) against the stove. The hostesses shouted, cursed and regarded both of us strangely. My nephew grinned stoically. His smirk didn't feel at all out of place, albeit highly sinister. The smirk apologized out loud for something; it also felt as if he were doing so in my stead.

'Why are you throwing plates at the stove?'

'I don't know ...'

'Anyway, new plates are being brought ... We won't have to wait any longer for the stew, and there will be no escape from eating.'

Once again he smirked.

'You are to blame for my smashing the plates!' I yelled at my nephew.

'Perhaps indirectly, but still it was you who smashed the plates.'

'You are clearly the more guilty.'

'Clearly a witness, you mean to say.'

'Don't argue. You are guilty because you did not take the empty plates and empty table game seriously. Only for a brief moment did I feel that you could

no longer tell the difference between a full and an empty plate, that it might be possible for you to eat a meal of thin air, anywhere, at any time ... You must have been critical at that point, too ... a shame.'

'I was!'

'If you were, why weren't you angry with me? What a joke – and yet not a single serious complaint from you.'

'You could not insult me, offend me; you'd have to try a lot harder to manage that.'

'And we will eat again as always ... All right. The food is coming, but remember, nephew, this isn't over yet. The score is still not settled.'

'Possibly, but I no longer believe that you are capable of settling scores.'

'I am, and so are you!'

'It remains unfinished.'

'What remains unfinished?'

'Dinner.'

I suppose it was, because while I was eating I had the feeling that I had already paid for the meal long ago in some bureaucrat's office. ■



JAAN OKS (1884–1918) was one of the more obscure authors of the Young Estonia movement. His nightmarish prose poetry, reminiscent of the French protosurrealist Comte de Lautréamont, probes the subconscious with compulsive intensity. This excerpt comes from his longer prose poem *Emased (Females)*, marked by a psychedelic dimension that dissolves the self and unsettles fixed identities.

# THE LABOURS OF CREATION by JAAN OKS

Translated by Ian Gwin

All of us – looking forward and back, those earnest ones who can't look back, those who drift proud and defiant, namelessly, and those who must lend power to the gaze of another over the hunched back of someone lying low to the ground – they hover as the others, scrape against the skies, against the spittle of air, pained by painful dark streaks. Like those who hurl themselves to the ground and hide behind empty sacks – all of them. Some look above, others ahead, into outstretched distances – all untrue. For above there are only the eyes of a beast – silent now, who knows why, it has slunk far off and no longer decorates the thirst-gaping nostril, stretched above the hoary beard, goading without essence.

Your soul is mine, and all your stretching, twisting, and excessive convulsions – they are for a world after. That is, a world to come, baited breath's manifest.

And then those, too, who thrust through mouldering rot, their souls paralysed by lust, all so gazes might comprehend how, above the land, those exhausted from looking forward and back grow hungry for what lies within and without, yearning far beneath wells and further over the trees. One closer to heaven boils in the fever of the search, a cell melts away from its soul by accident, unaware. Ah, if only they yet knew the elementary laws, the sex-breed that has been called a soul! But at last imprints of some kind begin to appear – aside from worthless repetitions: two who face the north wind and two who gaze at the worn beard swaying, at the cowardly-suffering eyes of the reproachful expectant. By twos – worlds lust – two sexes breed. Your soul is mine, and all your stretching, twisting, and excessive convulsions – they are for a world after. That is, a world to come, baited breath's manifest. Nothing other than two worlds without their cleaving: Male and Female. They are ancient yet unknown. That of body-flesh, what trembles,





Oskar Kallis (1892–1918)  
**Reclining Nude**  
 Oil on canvas, 1912  
 Art Museum of Estonia

stretch-scars – that which has been named the living soul within all of us, even those who whistle without a trace in the lascivious night, who desire only to vanish alone, like clouds gone dry, serenely mocking homely over two creatures breeding.

And the ones pressing together in pairs, reproach up from below, those who craft a slight patch of melting fire on the dark wall of an alien soul – in their domination they drink for the struggle of everlasting-consuming life, to digest it. Even the heavy male stallion is ashamed grieving for his fatigue, and the other exhausted one knows this through the power of thought, even if she does not look back from politesse. Yet whoever fails to hear the birthing song of the knife here, who otherwise, soul full of misfortune, searches for fullness in breed-sex, they will desperately feel how all and all empty out – and finally the mysterious little aggregate gets lost within the barren, empty, essenceless room of its soul where there is neither colour nor light with shadow. When all has been washed away, shaken out, wrung dry, then you know how – poof! – brief life is; why it did reach its natural end by the length of the females' beds, like a little, pure and winged nameless thing, first falling after love, sinks and yellows softly, oh so softly. Yet they are given names, cursed – shame won't stop them – the shame of futility, of existing without reason or cause.

*That is your breed-sex – and your soul's punishment, and afterwards they, too, will wander cursed around the profane decay of those who long since died in sin.*

When it is finished – it was short, so very short the night. Like a fool who has only just regained reason, like someone who just awoke. Why did the soul of breed-sex, in its beastly, animal heaviness, not drown all else, all that is other, extraneous, pointless – until it was gone? Why must they, why must they look back forward, gaze back again, why have they not crushed amid one another the percolating, weirdly pricking soul. And yet still they want to leap up over the matted, worn-down scruff into green, to watch tarnished and polluted air, so they have whole legs and everything's in its right place. Then wander alone, shamelessly, lugubrious while concealing an immeasurable world within yourself across horny meadows and beneath nasty trees rustling, and let the she-calf suckle long as time allows. Then turn, with your painfully expectant side set forward, in keeping with your character, and hear how that which is male violently thrusts, air-sucking suddenly lows plaintively. The surging power of lust impregnates the females with desires, dazed and foolish – then you seize the right instant to attack, take what is open, slick-skinned, and folded inward, into the male. Feel how he wants, and feel how he craves – from his own pain's rule. Penetrate him – or you go crazy from the will to annihilation and the frenzied beauty of desire. He forces himself into you, within you – or perishes, consuming himself under longing's pressure, falling without forgiveness, thrashing in trembling thirst for the male. That is your breed-sex – and your soul's punishment, and afterwards they, too, will wander cursed around the profane decay of those who long since died in sin.

That is the one who does not glimpse the sky from behind your shoulder's concealment, who doesn't see, who must blow steam from under the energetic force of the neck giving air for the thick-beaked birds' feasts of hatching. It can't, or doesn't dare, fill itself into you, but leans towards a proud coagulation. For the law is tremendous: women-folk – female by force – in coy sorrow for the thoughtless snapping of the final membrane. This is the whole song of life – everything and all – for the final victory. By force – all strength has its source here, fountain of fires, like one who politely looks back into

And you are the creator – demiurge  
of gods and humans and hungry  
ghosts by that very same thought  
all of us looking forward and back,  
up and down – in place of a world  
even, made, in the slow, blind  
wandering of time.

herself and suddenly finds the thought to elevate beauty, to refine the spirit of the age, which compels a leap forward. This beast-thought within the endless eternal drive for life – for the heightening of animal-forces' gorgeousness. And all of it to broaden beauty, make it heavier, grander, wider, deeper. A female, those nursing in the forest, until the murdered offspring of their sex-breed calls them once again for the soul's exaltation, on the

edge of the fields, proudly, unashamed in homeliness. If they look down and up, the weak supplicants feel ashamed for their build, while they fear the pressure of a fixed gaze darkened, then something futile fills the air, something miserably bullish, girl-ish-scorned, pitiful angel-divine. But as long as the breed-sex of the drifter functions for a soul – the living have nothing to do with the helpless-divine, or angel-futile. Here is the flesh-body – and it, too, may heavenly impregnate useless thoughts of life – for humans – for the Human – for the human is a sex-breed, and life is male or female, as are thoughts, which dance, conjugate, and breed one another. Good, then – the labours of creation ...

And you are the creator – demiurge of gods and humans and hungry ghosts by that very same thought all of us looking forward and back, up and down – in place of a world even, made, in the slow, blind wandering of time. Whirl within that conception like a fury, like a meat-thirsty, claw-toothed, lascivious female beast, like a creature of the male – a grave danger to all of this little, fragile globe. Like the first deeply passionate touch, which flashes back with an all-encompassing spark of greeting – feverish, fecund thoughts stir my molten body-flesh – naked, splattering, and creaking infantile bodies – aborted before their time, their time – time ... ■



Peeter Laurits (b. 1962)  
Object of Uncertain Terrestrial Origin  
2018



# THE COSMIC LANDSCAPE OF ESTONIAN LITERATURE

An interview with **HASSO KRULL**

by Kristjan Haljak

Given the nature of this publication, perhaps we should begin with the most fundamental question:

why, and which works of Estonian literature, should be translated into other languages at all?

Over a decade ago, you answered a very similar question in a popular weekly, saying that the book that should be translated into every language in the world is *Legends of Old Pagan* (*Muistendid Vanapaganast*, 1970). You added, however, that this would require a new, complete and literary edition.

It is also worth noting that you have just defended your long-gestating doctoral dissertation, *The Cosmic Trickster in Estonian Mythology*, in which you discussed Old Pagan and the literature surrounding him in considerable detail, closely linking him to Estonian place-lore.



HASSO KRULL (b. 1964) is an Estonian poet, essayist, and translator whose work bridges mythology, philosophy, and contemporary poetry. He has translated authors ranging from Jean Cocteau to Charles Bukowski. In 2024 he defended his doctoral thesis *Cosmic Trickster of Estonian Mythology*, and his new collection *Hämaruse meelespea* (*A Twilight Reminder*) will appear in autumn 2025.





Peeter Laurits (b. 1962)  
Twilight in the Garden of Eden II  
2025

So, in the spring of 2025, how do you see it now – why, how and what should be translated from Estonia ‘into every language in the world’? Do you still believe that Old Pagan is the trickster who could carve windows and doors for Estonian literature, landscape and mind into Europe, and indeed into world literature?

Translation is a form of discovery. A translation should contain something unknown – something unexpected or unforeseen – that the translator feels compelled to share because it was new to them. Sometimes translators doubt whether such sharing is even possible, and they try to soften the text, making it friendlier to the reader. Invisible commentaries creep in, and details that might cause unease or alienation are quietly removed. At other times, translators are convinced that no concessions should be made and may even twist their own language – its syntax and grammar – to echo the source language. The result can be a monster, a curiosity in its own right, understandable only if translated back into the original. Both extremes can diminish the element of discovery.

The trickster figure is so universal that readers will recognize them, no matter how strange or alien the details. In Estonian folklore, the trickster bears many names, most of them not true proper names, or else proper names that have become generic. The name ‘Vanapagan’ gained wider currency in the late nineteenth century, much like ‘Kalevipoeg’. Yet the character is always the same – he might just as well be called the Devil (Kurat), Judas or Jesus. Often he is simply ‘the strongman’ (*vägimees*). Nor is the trickster necessarily male: they can be female, gender-ambivalent, or not human at all – an otter, perhaps, or a bird flying over the sea. All these variations are broadly recognizable.

What, then, could make our trickster a genuine discovery for readers in other languages? The answer seems clear: only Estonian mythology, and the distinctive qualities of its mythological context, can do that.

In my view, translation is most compelling when the translator has discovered a text they simply cannot keep to themselves. Of course, this presupposes

**The trickster figure is so universal that readers will recognize them, no matter how strange or alien the details.**

excellent language skills. But if skilled translators are few, then closer cooperation between translators, publishers and authors becomes essential. There are many authors; we must navigate among them, seeking strong points of reference. Here, introductions and well-chosen excerpts are invaluable.

**But how can the distinctive qualities of the Estonian mythological context be presented in a way that appeals to foreign readers? And can we even speak of a mythological ‘core’ unique to Estonian culture? Is the search for such a collective core necessary at all? Or might a well-curated fragmentarium prove more fruitful?**

The key is curiosity. Nothing can be made appealing without the pull of a receptive curiosity. We see this most clearly in children. A young child wants to try, explore, test and learn everything – parents must work hard to keep disaster at bay. At first, the child obeys readily enough, but with age comes a fascination for the forbidden: prohibition only fuels curiosity. Even at school, most children start out wanting to learn everything. But if they discover that school repeats the same kind of material endlessly, with

no sense of direction, their interest drifts elsewhere. In all cases, curiosity is the engine.

In mythology, nothing can begin unless curiosity is stirred. Exactly how this happens cannot be predicted. But curiosity is contagious; it feeds on very little. Last year, one of Estonia's publishing sensations was a complete new translation of James Joyce's *Ulysses*.

**Landscape is literature. Folklore is oral literature – it is simply unwritten, at least until ethnologists or collectors of antiquities arrive.**

Was it because people yearned to read 800 pages of dense, complex prose? Of course not. People's curiosity had simply been piqued – what is this thing everyone has been talking about for a hundred years? Surely there must be something in it! Curiosity is always built from two components: a spark of excitement and a scarcity of information. This is precisely how computer games work. Just watch how children play Minecraft or Roblox.

No mythology has a single, unique core. Mircea Eliade thought creation myths formed the core of mythology, but this is a very general definition – almost tautological – because if we did not distinguish primordial creation time from the present time, how could we recognize myths as myths? One could just as well say the core of mythology is myth itself. Yet myths reach us only in fragments; mythology is always already a literary rendering. Mythology can be unified; a myth cannot. And if the myth is the 'core', how can that core exist only in fragments?

I like Timothy Morton's maxim that the sum of the parts is always greater than any whole. Myths can exist in so many variations that no single mythology can

contain them all. But there is such a thing as a mythical field on which mythology rests. This field must be organized – by emphasizing certain moments, creating contrasts and so on.

In my view, the organizing principle of Estonian mythology is landscape. Mythology begins with the myth of the creation of the landscape, and the creation of landscape is itself a trick. That is why the trickster is so central. I do not claim that landscape creation is unique to Estonian mythology – that would be absurd – but the links between the trickster, creation and a certain kind of landscape in Estonia are especially fascinating. Through myth, the landscape becomes singular, and thus so does the myth. Today, this has clear implications for the ecology of the landscape. These implications, however, are not limited to Estonia – they extend to any landscape, for the ecology of landscape is universal.

**If, however, we do wish to speak of some kind of national literature – as the title of our journal, *Estonian Literature*, in its way demands – should we also trace connections between landscape and literature? Is this even relevant in the context of contemporary literature, or in 2025 is Estonian literature already independent of the Estonian landscape? And is it always dependent on the Estonian language? For example, the poems by Triin Paja that we published in this issue were written directly in English – although it is worth noting that she also writes masterful, enchanting poetry in Estonian. So how should we, in general, think about the relationship between landscape, language and literature?**

Landscape is literature. Folklore is oral literature – it is simply unwritten, at least until ethnologists or collectors of antiquities arrive. Reading the landscape is an act of literary interpretation, because the landscape can only be seen

as landscape through tradition, and that tradition is always bound to storytelling. Narration is the axis of tradition. The Estonian landscape would not be 'the Estonian landscape' without Estonian tradition, without Estonian storytelling; in other words, the landscape is narrated into being, and the Estonian landscape is narrated into being as Estonian.

Other forms of literature in turn rest upon this storytelling. Much literature has been written in Estonian in exile, and it largely falls into two categories: on the one hand, the attempt to escape the Estonian landscape entirely, to move elsewhere (for example, Karl Ristikivi's historical trilogies or Ilmar Laaban's surrealist poetry); on the other, the attempt to regain the landscape by imagination, to recreate it *in absentia* (for example, Marie Under's exile poetry or Bernard Kangro's Tartu-focused novels). In the first case, new stories are sought in order to anchor new visions; in the second, there is a radical refusal to let go of the old story, whether out of nostalgia or because its power remains undiminished. In both cases, however, the narrative bound to the landscape remains the decisive weight on the scales.

This raises the question: is it inevitable to write about the Estonian landscape in Estonian – especially if the tradition is largely Estonian-based? Here, there are several caveats. First, the Estonian landscape has never been described or spoken of exclusively in Estonian. In the early nineteenth century, liberally minded Baltic German intellectuals developed an interest in local folklore; they gradually began collecting and describing it, and of course most publications appeared in German. Estonia's first historical novel, Garlieb Merkel's *Wannem Ymanta* (1802) – which has been called a 'prose poem' and whose subtitle is in fact *A Latvian Saga (Eine Lettische*


*Sage)* – was likewise written in German. Friedrich Kreutzwald's epic *Kalewipoeg, eine Estnische Sage* appeared in 1857–61 in a bilingual edition, and it is worth mentioning that the German text was of great importance to the author, who waited patiently for its translation to be completed. Bilingualism thus has a significant role in the Estonian literary tradition, and without it one cannot speak of the nineteenth-century Estonian landscape at all.

Second, if we equate language, literature and landscape, we create a very strong ideological chain of equivalence. It begins to seem as if one could not exist without the other two. From here, a kind of metaphysics of landscape begins to develop, assuming that a certain type of landscape gives rise to a certain type of

**If we equate language, literature and landscape, we create a very strong ideological chain of equivalence. It begins to seem as if one could not exist without the other two.**

tradition, and therefore a certain type of literature. The folklore of mountain peoples is different from that of steppe peoples; coastal folk tell different stories from those inland. But such an analogy cannot be carried too far. Rather, I would say that Estonia is a traditional ecological community in which language, literature and landscape create a vast and intricate network. Into this weave, other languages also fit, and many strands from other traditions extend. What matters is the cosmology that holds this network together. And here every strand is essential – from the oldest myths to Triin Paja's poems in English. ■





ANDREI HVOSTOV (b. 1963) is an Estonian journalist and writer who studied history at the University of Tartu. His works often intertwine historical and autobiographical themes, focusing on questions of memory and identity. Among his best-known books are the autobiographical novel *Sillamäe passioon* (*Sillamäe Passion*, 2011), which depicts his youth in the mostly Russian-speaking town of Sillamäe, and the intimate work *Kirjad Maarale* (*Letters to Maara*, 2017), a series of letters to his granddaughter. This year he published the essay collection *Labürint all vasakus nurgas* (*Labyrinth in the Lower Left Corner*, 2025).

# THE IMPOTENCE OF WAR

by ANDREI HVOSTOV

War does not care for prose writers. Yes, of course, I am obliged to generalize: the saying 'when the cannons speak, the muses fall silent' is meant to apply to all artists. But, like many such sweeping declarations, this one, too, despite its elegance, does not guarantee truth. Poets are able to create in wartime.

Even lying in the mud of a trench, they are able to write. In British poetry, for instance, Isaac Rosenberg wrote 'Break of Day in the Trenches' in December 1916, while on the Western Front, expressing sympathy for a cosmopolitan rat that scurries with impartial ease between British and German trenches, making no moral judgement on the soldiers of either side. Or take the German poet Walter Flex, who died in 1917 on the island of Saaremaa, but managed before then to publish his autobiographical *Wanderer zwischen beiden Welten* (*Wanderer Between Two Worlds*), which includes

the poem 'Wildgänse rauschen durch die Nacht' ('Wild Geese Rush Through the Night') – one of the most iconic German literary texts of the First World War, later set to music, and translated into French. Like Rosenberg's work, Flex's poem was written directly in response to front-line experience. Yet rather than engaging with a rat darting between trenches, Flex turns to the wild geese flying above them, calling out as they cleave the night sky, bound north, away from their wintering grounds.

A person in the midst of unending horror encounters some living soul or is struck



by a sudden emotion. He finds a scrap of paper in his pocket and jots down the first lines that come to mind. The poet's muses never fall silent.

Prose writers have, as a rule, composed their great war novels only after the fact. Hašek didn't write about the exploits of the good soldier Švejk during the First World War, only afterwards. *Im Westen nichts Neues* (All Quiet on the Western Front) by Remarque, *Voyage au bout de la nuit* (Journey to the End of the Night) by Céline, *In Stahlgewittern* (Storm of Steel) by Jünger, *A Farewell to Arms* by Hemingway, *Жизнь и судьба* (Life and Fate) by Grossman, *Catch-22* by Heller, and *Names in Marble* (Nimed mar-mortahvilil) by Kivikas were all written between two and ten years after the war in question had ended.

Prose writers have, as a rule, composed their great war novels only after the fact. Hašek didn't write about the exploits of the good soldier Švejk during the First World War, only afterwards.

The authors needed time to gather themselves psychologically to make sense of what they had lived through. There is one exception, Henri Barbusse's *Le Feu* (Under Fire), published in 1916, which is based on diary entries written at the front. The book influenced later war writers, including Hemingway, who valued Barbusse's novel as the only successful attempt to depict war while it was still ongoing.

In truth, the situation is more dire still – prose writers are unable to write anything at all during wartime, save for newspaper articles, essays or a few inconsequential fragments, which today

only interest specialists like literary historians or academics.

Thomas Mann's *Der Zauberberg* (The Magic Mountain) was published in 1924, six years after the First World War. *Doktor Faustus* (Doctor Faustus) appeared in print in 1946, two years after the Second World War. This is not to say that Mann wrote nothing during the wars. He did, and prolifically. But that work only interests me as a historian – someone seeking to grasp the despair of a great author during an era when his people and society were collectively running amok.

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, launched on 24 February 2022, did not come as a surprise. I had been following the speeches of the Russian president and his closest advisers with professional interest – that is, as someone educated as a historian – and I understood very well that his lectures on the non-existence of Ukraine's statehood and people would inevitably culminate in aggression. And yet it still felt entirely shocking.

In the first months of the war, I was capable of doing only two things: sitting on websites broadcasting Russian-language news and thinking about what I personally ought to do if the war were to spread to Estonian soil.

Emigration was out of the question. I cannot imagine myself living anywhere but Estonia. Two semesters spent in Berlin a quarter of a century ago were enough to convince me of the impossibility of living abroad. Nor was quietly staying behind an option should war erupt. I have reason to suspect I'm on a list of individuals to be 'rounded up' in the event of an occupation regime. Not because of my literary work – no, I don't think so highly of myself – but, likely because of my journalistic writing.

The only solution I saw to overcoming my fear was in joining the Defence League, taking part in military exercises and training with people who, should the worst come to pass, would help me face it.

Not to survive. But to retain the ability to choose how I die.

Struggling with all that anxiety, I abandoned work on the novel whose manuscript I had read aloud to friends before the war in Ukraine began – and received encouraging feedback.

In hindsight, I can name many reasons why I lost the ability to write anything more substantial than the usual weekly political trivialities. But the core reason remains the lightning-flash realization that struck me on 24 February 2022: in the face of global madness, no one would need my fiction any more. Even if the novel's content directly engaged with the current war.

Contact with the reality around us lays bare a text's weaknesses more cruelly than anything else. What is there left to say after Bucha? That what once happened is happening again? That next door to us, the atrocities of the Second World War are being repeated? And then what?

Wail, wring one's hands, bang one's head against the keyboard?

How can one go along with public calls, by Estonia and Eastern Europe more broadly, for the organizers of Russian aggression to face international justice, to be brought before a new Nuremberg tribunal, when one knows how ineptly the original Nuremberg tribunal was conducted after the Second World War? And yet that same tribunal is one of the plot lines in my novel, which refuses to be completed.

Fukuyama's dream, and even his academically grounded promise of the 'end of history', was little more than a series of clever quips. Humanity has not become wiser or more moral. Humanity remains just as ready to step on the same rake again, to repeat the errors of the past. When this realization hits, your arms fall limply to your sides.

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The same may have happened to the prose writers of earlier generations who, in the midst of the world wars, lost the ability to write anything grand or meaningful.

To realize you are but a tiny insect caught in the middle of catastrophe is paralysing.

The poet begins to scream.

The prose writer falls silent. ■



# I DID NOT WANT IT

SEBASTIAN GUGGOLZ  
on the German edition  
of Karl Ristikivi's  
*The Night of Souls*

Translated from German  
by Yvonne Bindrim

*The Night of Souls* first came to me as a rumour. Every translator from Estonian I met, whenever the conversation turned to classics that ought to be available in German, soon mentioned the name Karl Ristikivi and almost always also the title of this novel that stands like a monolith at the centre of his oeuvre:

*The Night of Souls*  
(*Hingede öö*).

I was assured that this novel holds a special place in Estonian literature, representing its connection to European modernism – to Franz Kafka and Albert Camus, to Hans Henny Jahnn and Jean Cocteau. When people spoke of this legendary novel, even Dante Alighieri's descent into the underworld or Lewis Carroll's world behind the looking-glass didn't seem far off. A reach into the upper register of novelistic art not only of the 20th century, then. It is a common practice to emphasize the status of a work by comparing it to works from other linguistic traditions: every country has its 'Estonian Camus' or 'Bulgarian Joyce', its 'Icelandic Kafka', 'Slovenian Woolf' or 'Greenlandic Proust' – a rhetorical device that need not imply that the literary





Cover of the first edition of *Hingede öö* (1953), designed by Karin Luts

altitude or indeed the commercial viability of the authors is, in fact, comparable.

Despite my caution, despite my restraint – my own desire to read is one of the main driving forces behind my publishing house: the wish to access texts considered classics in their original language that have yet to be made available in German – I could not resist. Maximilian Murmann embarked on a journey for me into Ristikivi's realm and translated the novel *Die Nacht der Seelen*. By happy chance, I met Rein Raud (I still remember how he was introduced to me as a 'Baltic universal genius'), who agreed without hesitation to contribute a thoughtful afterword that helps us German readers to contextualize this extraordinary Estonian novel.

Within Ristikivi's work, *The Night of Souls* marks a caesura, for nothing he had written before resembles this book and neither does anything that came after. A similar rupture is also found at the heart of the novel itself: on page 197 of 356 in Murmann's German translation – which, in its dissecting clarity, paradoxically reveals the palimpsests and obscurities of the original almost too starkly – the first part ends with the phrase 'NO ENTRY FOR STRANGERS!' set in capital letters. It is immediately followed by a ten-page printed insert, the 'Letter to Mrs Agnes Rohumaa', in which a poetics of alogism is developed – a poetics of non-understanding.

The key sentence, the one that responds to the letter writer's question – why the novel shuns dramatic arcs, why it tells no story, why it circles around itself or rather an empty core without direction, purpose or sense – is this, stark and brief: 'I did not want it.' On the one hand, it evokes the absurd refusal of Herman Melville's *Bartleby*; but on the other, it is equally a powerful declaration of creative intent. I, the author – the one who

conceived and wrote the novel – I want it this way. And no other. That explains everything; that is what gives the work its validity.

I had already been prepared for this moment by the aforementioned rumours surrounding the novel. I was told to expect something in the reading that exists in no other novel in quite the same form. Yet when the translation was complete and I was able to read it through in one sitting, it hit me directly. And it still does today, five years after I published it, when I open the book and return to the letter. I can still hardly believe how lucid and electric that letter is – oscillating between fictional or fictionalized misdirection and sincere poetic testimony – how it simply stands there in the middle of the novel. Is Ristikivi sabotaging himself, interrupting his own voice because he no longer trusts his path? Or is it, on the contrary, a gesture of supreme sovereignty? Is the act of creation so absolute that the author can afford to rupture the illusion, to allow 'reality' to intrude upon the fiction, thereby rendering the construction of the novel even more unassailable by means of this incorporated disruption? I have never arrived at a satisfactory solution to this puzzle, but the journey of trying to understand it proves fruitful every time.

What is extraordinary is not only Karl Ristikivi's formal boldness – his audacity in confronting us, the readers, with ourselves in the middle of reading; catching us off guard with our own emotions and reactions, where we normally feel safe and unobserved – just as striking is the emotional core of the novel, which lies in its portrayal of the consciousness of an exile, a condition that still (or again) speaks directly to us today. I would describe it as an experience of existential dislocation, perhaps even of being overwhelmed, along with a retreat into and encapsulation within the history of one's

own emotions. It is, in all likelihood, not voluntary or self-determined at all, but rather a form of entanglement, a state of captivity within one's own story.

The narrative proceeds according to a dream logic: reality is not *depicted* but *absorbed* into the fiction, transferred from one sphere to another, just as

I was told to expect something in the reading that exists in no other novel in quite the same form. Yet when the translation was complete and I was able to read it through in one sitting, it hit me directly.

dreams do with their dream-narratives. It is references, memories and associations that cross the boundaries between worlds – between reality and fiction or dream – and bind them together. The narrator of *The Night of Souls*, who hides behind the mask of the 'author' (or is it the other way around, the author hiding behind the mask of the 'narrator'?) offers, in the guise of a question, the novel's decisive answer: 'In the end, is not everything imagined in literature a dream, dreamed by both author and reader, although they are not asleep?'

The narrative proceeds according to a dream logic: reality is not *depicted* but *absorbed* into the fiction.

Literature – with its shimmering ambivalence and endless wealth of language and narrative that demands ever-renewed interpretation – lies behind one of the two doors evoked in the epigraph Ristikivi borrowed from the Finnish poet



Uuno Kailas. Ristikivi throws this door wide open and invites us to step through with him: 'So I have but two doors, / to dream and death they lead.' The second, the other door, leads to stillness, to surrender, to the great immobility of death.

Sleep – or rather sleepwalking – connects *The Night of Souls* with another central, monolithic work of world literature: Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*. At first glance the two books appear to have

In a war, there are inevitably two sides: one that starts the war and another that defends itself. Since one side alone cannot wage a war, the aggressor is entirely innocent.

little in common. Mann's novel takes place on the eve of the First World War in a Swiss sanatorium removed from the everyday world, isolated and weakened by its characters' suffering – from their neuroses and, yes, from the perceived meaninglessness of their own existence. Hans Castorp and the other guests become entangled in, and exhausted by, ideological and philosophical debates and digressions. The novel ends in a 'turning point in time', leading directly into a wartime society.

The situation in *The Night of Souls* is almost a mirror image: war, exile and the loss of homeland lie in the protagonist's past. His life is marked not by a lack of experience but rather by an excess of it. Memories and unfinished threads catch up with him and flood him with impressions and encounters from his past. And yet, like Hans Castorp and his companions in Mann's novel, he, too, reflects and becomes entangled in verbal skirmishes and exchanges with the characters from

his own history – those he meets in the endless corridors and ever-deepening recesses of the 'House of the Dead Man'.

'In a war, there are inevitably two sides: one that starts the war and another that defends itself. Since one side alone cannot wage a war, the aggressor is entirely innocent. The one who defends is guilty, for it is only through them that war becomes reality,' says Pastor Roth in the second part of *The Night of Souls*, in the chapter 'The Sixth Witness', which addresses the deadly sin of wrath – and one is reminded of the events in early 2025 in the Oval Office surrounding Volodymyr Zelensky, when the Ukrainian president, in a demonic twist freed of all reason, suddenly found himself being labelled a dictator. The humour in *The Night of Souls*, and the at times disconcerting relief it brings, is a vital aspect I must not neglect to mention. The wit and sometimes almost slapstick comedy – which arises equally from helplessness and from acute exaggeration, as in the Pastor Roth scene – carries us as readers through the novel, shielding us from both pathos and sentimental pity.

That is why *The Night of Souls* still feels so fresh and surprising today, resonating in places with our present. And that is why I hope its discovery will continue across more languages, for only when it is translated into our languages can the world begin to recognize what a visionary, intense and profoundly European novel we have been gifted from the north-eastern edge of the continent. ■

SEBASTIAN GUGGOLZ (b. 1982) is a German publisher and the founder of Guggolz Verlag, established in 2014 to publish new translations of forgotten authors from Northern and Eastern Europe.



Eduard Wiiralt (1898–1954)  
Three Old Men (Card Players)  
Indian ink on paper, 1922  
Art Museum of Estonia



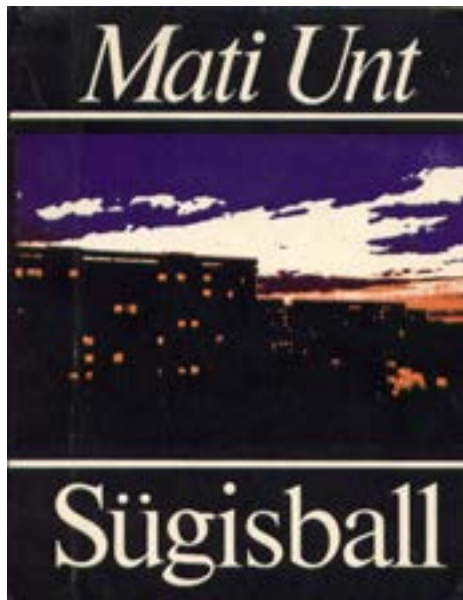


# URBAN ECHOES: REDISCOVERING MATI UNT'S **AUTUMN BALL** AS A MODERN CLASSIC by MAXIMILIAN MURMANN

The literary modernist movement created its own genre for the city, whether it be John Dos Passos's *Manhattan Transfer* or Alfred Döblin's *Berlin Alexanderplatz* – novels that capture urban life in all its fragmentation, anonymity and existential coldness and which are still considered milestones of modern literature. Less well known, yet equally significant, is Mati Unt's *Sügisball*.

**S**ügisball. Stseenid linnaelust (*Autumn Ball: Scenes from City Life*), published in 1979 in Soviet Estonia by a writer hailed early on as a 'prodigy of Estonian literature', whose life was cut short at just sixty-one years of age. With striking precision, Unt describes life in Tallinn's Mustamäe district – an urban microcosm that rivalled the Western urban jungle in its social discord, psychological isolation and atmospheric density. Once a symbol of progress, Mustamäe has lost its shine – much like countless other socialist-era housing estates from Berlin to Budapest, from Prague to Gdańsk.

In this microcosm, we encounter six main characters whose lives intersect superficially, yet deeper connections remain fleeting. They are the poet Eero, the architect Maurer, the doorman Theo, the hairdresser August Kask, the telephone operator Laura and young Peeter. Each of them represents the contradictions of modern existence, entangled in the social and psychological upheavals of a system that seemingly seeks to regulate everything but leaves people alienated. In essence, *Autumn Ball* is a collective novel, a web of solitary lives woven into a single, fragmented urban narrative.



Cover of the first edition of *Sügisball* (1979), designed by Karin Luts

Film Poster for *Autumn Ball* (2007), directed by Veiko Õunpuu



Mati Unt, who was in his early thirties when he wrote the novel and lived in Mustamäe himself, knew that a cold, constructed living space is not conducive to life. This perspective is reinforced with quotes from French philosopher Gaston Bachelard, whose *Poetics of Space* is just one of many references that Unt, who introduced postmodernism into Estonian literature and theatre, draws upon. Unt does not describe an exclusively Soviet or socialist phenomenon; references to the system in which the work was created are well measured and subtle – for example, wine from Georgia, militia on the streets checking people's IDs, official statistics from the USSR.

There is no *Homo sovieticus* in Unt's writing. Rather, it is modern humans, female and male, young and old, from different backgrounds, all relatable and quirky in their own ways, who get a voice. The emotional weight of the characters' environment is ever present, and as they move through their lives tensions sometimes boil over into eruptions of violence, often fuelled by alcohol. The only one who seems truly enthusiastic about the new form of housing is, ironically, architect Maurer, who himself has made a modest contribution to the creation of Mustamäe.

It is surprising that *Autumn Ball*, despite its satirical take on the seemingly progressive yet often bleak and ennui-filled way of life in the Soviet Union, as well as its innovative approach and international feel, did not fall victim to censorship. Even more remarkably, the book was initially printed in an edition of 28,000 copies, which sold out within ten days. Since then, there have been numerous reprints and new editions, with the latest published in 2025 by the renowned publisher Tänapäev.

One reason for Unt's success, and for the success of *Autumn Ball* in particular, may

lie in his deep understanding of the contrasts in Estonian society, drawn from his own experience. He was a city dweller through and through, but he came from a remote place, where he lacked intellectual and artistic support structures. Yet he was considered the most modern, the most cosmopolitan author of his time, according to fellow writer Mihkel Mutt, who published a comprehensive biography of Unt in 2024 titled *Liblikas, kes lendas liiga lähedale. Mati Unt ja tema aeg* (*The Butterfly Who Flew Too Close: Mati Unt and His Era*) – a year that saw a veritable Mati Unt boom in Estonia.

Although the lives of Unt's six protagonists unfold in Mustamäe, amid panel blocks of flats between five and nine storeys high, their thoughts drift far and wide, to other continents and even distant planets. Theo, who works as a doorman at a local restaurant and meticulously records his affairs, has a penchant for astronomy and metaphysical musings. Then there's the barber August Kask, who casually remarks how the length of men's hair in magazines from the West seems to fluctuate – a subtle nod to the cultural shifts of the '68 movement. Yet another character, Laura, escapes her routine as a worker and single mother by immersing herself in a TV soap opera, which shifts between settings in Britain and Bavaria.

The film adaptation of *Autumn Ball* was released in cinemas in 2007, two years after Mati Unt's death. It loosely follows the source material (the actors were not allowed to read the book during preparation for the filming) and affords itself a certain freedom – as, for example, when the author's alter ego, Eero, is renamed Mati on screen. The film, which has become a much-referenced cult classic, received an award at the Venice Film Festival and has frequently been compared to the works of Aki Kaurismäki. Certain similarities to the Finnish filmmaker can also be found in the book,

although the novel was published prior to his debut as a director in 1983. In fact, it is not entirely unlikely that Kaurismäki had read the book, which was published in Finland by Gummerus in autumn 1980 and received a considerable amount of positive feedback.

The book has been translated into more than ten languages – there is even an English version, published by the Estonian publisher Perioodika, which probably did not receive an awful lot of recognition in English-speaking countries. The German translation was published two years before the fall of the Berlin Wall by Aufbau, the largest pub-

**There is no *Homo sovieticus* in Unt's writing. Rather, it is modern humans, female and male, young and old, from different backgrounds.**

lisher in East Germany. Not unusually for the time, the book was translated via Russian, resulting in a convoluted, overly complex style that bears little resemblance to the original. This calls for a new German translation, as it is precisely Unt's laconic voice that lends the novel its wit and lightness of touch. Unt does not evaluate; he describes modern life in all its absurdity, and in doing so is 'radically empathetic', as Estonian art historian and playwright Eero Epner writes

**Even more remarkably, the book was initially printed in an edition of 28,000 copies, which sold out within ten days.**

in his afterword to the 2025 reissue of *Autumn Ball*. Yet Unt's writing is not only empathetic but also associative, nervous and erratic – he frequently leaves the narrative, zooms out of the action, until the protagonists are no longer in sight, weaving in encyclopaedic, incidental and





anecdotal elements, only to return to the story as if nothing had happened.

The absurdity of the city is only surpassed by the even greater absurdity of the countryside. At the opening of the

**The absurdity of the city is only surpassed by the even greater absurdity of the countryside.**

book, a freight train rolls through the countryside, unmanned, and a famous opera singer goes missing. The fact that the novel does not begin with 'Scenes from City Life', as the subtitle suggests, but with two anecdotes in rural settings, is no coincidence. The journey from the

countryside to the city is a central motif in Estonian literature and a metaphor for the development of Estonian society, particularly in the works of the great Estonian literary classic Anton Hansen Tammsaare (*Truth and Justice*) and his literary successor Karl Ristikivi (*Tallinn Trilogy*). Mati Unt, who greatly admired Tammsaare and successfully staged his works in Estonia's major theatres, stated in an interview that *Autumn Ball* is precisely a book about the shock experienced by the people of Estonia when they were forced to urbanize at break-neck speed, ultimately leading to widespread alienation.

In Unt's world, a person's drive to shape their environment extends even to

nature itself: strange pipes rise from the ground, kitschy castles stand abandoned amid the landscape and mysterious railings lead from the depths of the forest straight into the sea. Yet in *Autumn Ball*, nature does not merely serve as a backdrop, it acts as a unifying element – through nature, the characters silently connect with one another. Natural phenomena, such as an approaching thunderstorm or the first snow, blur the individual episodes and reflect the inner state of the protagonists.

This inner state, imbued with wonder and a kind of innocent curiosity, is no coincidence either. Mati Unt himself was an author of great enthusiasm, often described as hot-headed – a temperamental intellectual who viewed the world with an almost naïve gaze. This attitude finds its counterpart in the character of the boy Peeter, who watches the thunderstorm over the city with a mixture of awe and fascination. In Peeter, several facets of Unt's literary temperament come together: the melancholy, the fine humour and a gravity that is sharpened by childlike directness. When he randomly calls people and asks them seemingly trivial riddles, they are, in truth, existential questions – simple, honest and genuine.

In such moments, not only is the unique sound of the novel tangible but also its sense of temporality. That Peeter uses a traditional telephone to make calls now carries a certain nostalgic charm, yet this detail points to a deeper difference: life had a different rhythm back then. People had time, space for silence, for boredom – a state that, for Unt, does not signify a lack but opens up possibilities. Today's constant accessibility and perpetual flood of information thus leads to the emergence of new forms of isolation. A charming counterpoint to the loneliness of the characters is the great humour in *Autumn Ball*. One example

is a scene in which Eero, slightly drunk, ends up at a party with people he has just met. He agrees to fetch more alcohol, but after an odyssey through the identical buildings of Mustamäe he finds himself, confused, in Laura's apartment. Without a word, he sits down beside her on the sofa and watches television with her.

**In Unt's world, a person's drive to shape their environment extends even to nature itself: strange pipes rise from the ground, kitschy castles stand abandoned amid the landscape**

The novel culminates in a tragic accident, but what has fatal consequences for some brings happiness to others. One might almost call it a happy ending were it not for the fact that Unt doesn't let his protagonists off the hook. *Autumn Ball* is Mati Unt's most important work – an outstanding book about modern life that feels more relevant today than ever. While Döblin's *Berlin* and Dos Passos's *New York* have long found their place in the canon, Unt's *Tallinn* is a literary space that today deserves to be rediscovered as an Eastern European variant of the modern urban novel, both prescient and compelling. ■

MAXIMILIAN MURMANN (b. 1987) is a German translator of Estonian, Finnish and Anglo-American literature.

Review by Merlin Kirikal

# A MANIFESTO OF GRATITUDE AND WONDER



KAIRI LOOK  
*Dance the Dust off the Floor*  
(*Tantsi tolm pörandast*), 2025  
Loomingu Raamatukogu  
168 pp.

The 2025 programme of the prestigious local book series *Loomingu Raamatukogu* – a long-running Estonian book series founded in 1957 and renowned for introducing world literature and significant new Estonian writing – opens with *Dance the Dust off the Floor* (*Tantsi tolm pörandast*), Kairi Look's first novel for adults following her success in the field of children's literature.

A tender and luminous coming-of-age tale, it follows Katariina, an Estonian woman born during the final years of the Soviet occupation, tracing her life from childhood into early adulthood. Opening with an epigraph from Polish Nobel laureate Wisława Szymborska – a quiet homage to persistence – the novel emerges as a celebration of forward motion, inner strength and hope, motifs echoed in its four brief 'Beginnings', one of which, tellingly, appears at the end of the book.

In its short chapters, Look portrays how the emotionally secure maternal home lays the foundation for a child's developing confidence, creativity and resilience. Rituals and calm, instilled early on, shape a deep emotional pattern and specific set of skills that remain intact even in the face of loss and mourning, enabling the protagonist to 'live and love more and more madly'.





The novel begins with a sequence of short scenes narrated in the third person that offer a tender glimpse into the cosy domesticity of an Estonian home in the 1980s. The prose, impressionistic in tone, encourages the reader to feel rather than analyse or observe.

Among the many metaphors for adjustment, the children's swing stands out: someone beloved gives the child enough momentum, back and forth, until she is ready to take over

On the micro level, Look avoids cause-and-effect logic. There is no analytical temperament here, no irony; those in search of naturalism will be disappointed. Instead, through a style laced with alliteration and a rudimentary, even chant-like syntax, the narrative reveals how young Katariina, guided by her religiously devout great-grandmother – a former paediatrician – learns about freedom through lullabies, ecstatic dance and imaginative play. She is read to tirelessly, in the hope of nurturing her inner growth and sense of optimism, the material ranging from Estonian folklore to the Moomins and to Astrid Lindgren.

There is no analytical temperament here, no irony; those in search of naturalism will be disappointed.

So radiant is the maternal presence that even in the second part – also told in the third person and aiming at a broader level of reflection after the great-grandmother has died – the adolescent Katariina's spirit remains unbroken despite the difficulties of puberty.

In the novel's third part, a second-person narrative written with rare emotional immediacy, Katariina, now a young woman, studies medicine in a European metropolis while searching for her own rhythm. The narrative logic does not disappoint: she grows into a free-spirited traveller with a flair for the arts, finds love with ease and commits herself to the mystery of life's dance. Eventually, Katariina faces a crisis and rises from the ashes in the course of a near-revelatory journey. Through movement – between places, languages and various forms of dance – she reaches what the authorial voice implies is an essential threshold. It is strength, will, her own game.

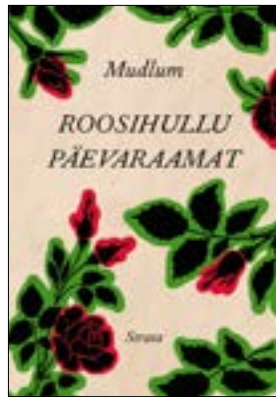
Among the many metaphors for adjustment, the children's swing stands out: someone beloved gives the child enough momentum, back and forth, until she is ready to take over using her own body – able both to control the dangerous speed and to launch herself from stillness, again and again, to find fresh meaning in every ascent.

It seems such strength is only possible when someone has loved the child into being, instilling the belief that 'everything is here and everything is now'. A novel that tenderly cherishes such primal affection, *Dance the Dust off the Floor* reads as a manifesto for gratitude and wonder. ■

Konrad Mägi (1878–1925)  
Portrait of Elsi Lõo  
Oil on canvas, 1915  
Art Museum of Estonia







MUDLUM  
*Diary of a Rose Lunatic*  
 (Roosihullu päevaraamat)  
 Strata, 240 pp.

Although Mudlum (b. 1966) entered the literary scene late – just over a decade ago – she has become an undeniable and inimitable force in Estonian literature. Her debut, the short story collection *Tõsine inimene* (*A Serious Person*, 2014), which mainly gathered texts first published on the playful blog of the literary group ZA/UM, later internationally known as the creative collective behind the video game *Disco Elysium*, instantly won readers' hearts.

## SOMETHING ODDLY EXPAN- SIVE IN EVERY SENTENCE

Review by Heli Allik

Since then, she has written a mix of novels, novellas and short stories while also establishing herself as a prolific and sharp-witted critic. She is the only person in Estonian literary history to have received the Cultural Endowment's Prose Award two years in a row, first for *Poola poisid* (*Polish Boys*, 2019), a novel about the dreams of youth and how they are swept away by the realities of adulthood – which also won the European Union Prize for Literature – and then for *Mitte ainult minu tädi Ellen* (*Not Only My Aunt Ellen*), a searingly honest and painful narrative about the life, illness and death of her aunt, Ellen Noot – famous as the third wife of writer Juhan Smuul – and the process of coming to terms with it all.



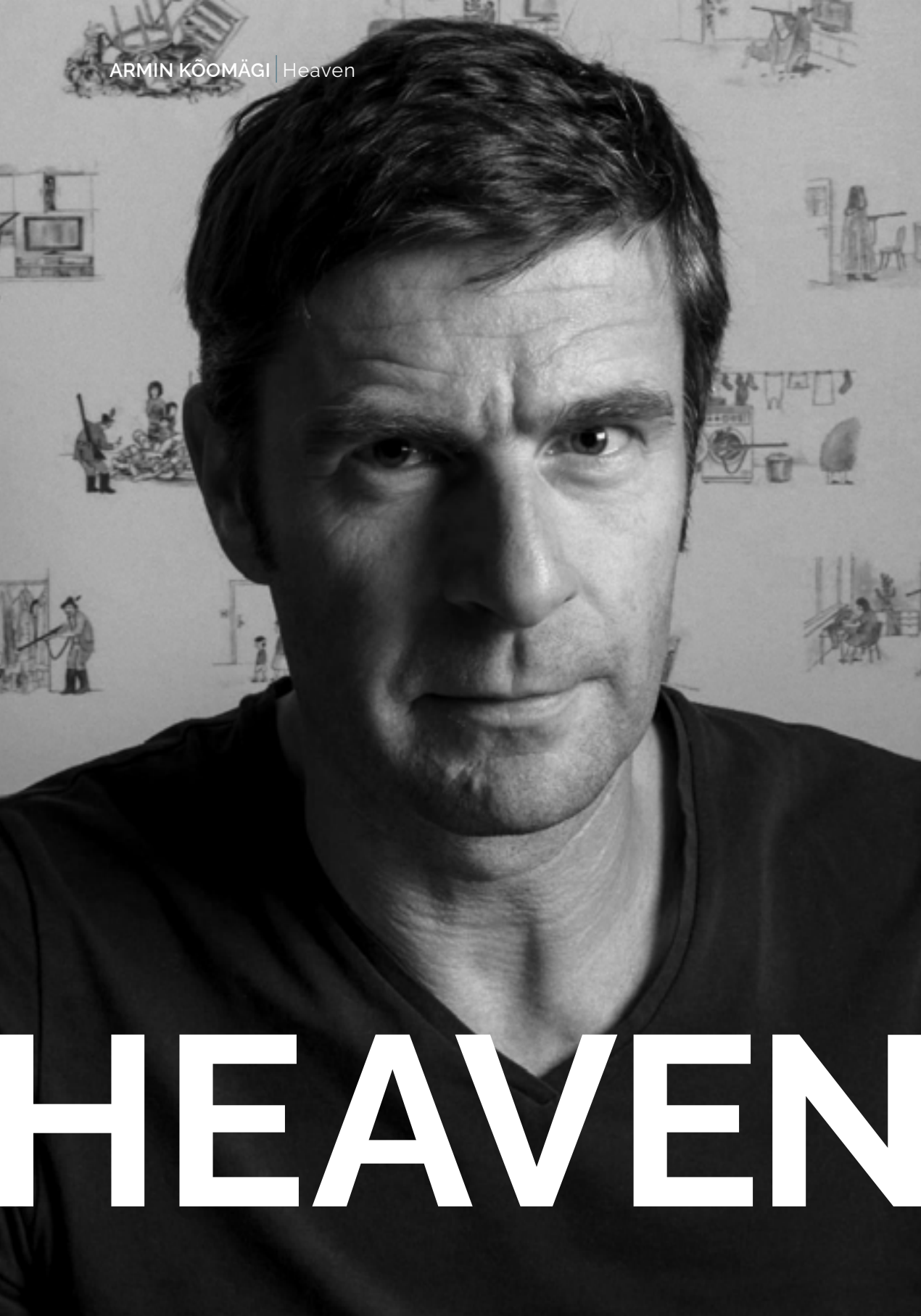
*Diary of a Rose Lunatic* (Roosihullu päevaraamat, 2024) appears at first to concern itself with the little things – bridges, crocuses, pansies, rain showers, droughts, autumn asters, galoshes, pruning shears, floribundas, phlox, garden hoses, aprons, wild orchids, sweet grass and roses – such everyday things, in fact, that the reader may begin to wonder whether this is literature at all. This impression is reinforced by the book's diary format and the author's deliberately amateurish ink drawings of her surroundings: a dachshund, coastal reeds, washing drying on a line, yarrow, the door of an old granary.

Even the book's design seems to steer us in that direction. With its yellowed pages, large notebook-like format, nostalgic rose motifs and dirt-smudged, thumbled pages, the book feels like a

bundle of personal garden notes found in some attic rather than a work of fiction.

But this is deceptive. There is something oddly expansive in every sentence, between the lists of seedlings and flower beds – glimpses of the wider world. Each page might appear to recount nothing more than the daily chores, yet beneath the surface lies a contemplation of life and death, of the human life cycle, of the overwhelming power of nature and how helplessly small we are in the face of it, of fate and our attempts to come to terms with it. Every ink drawing revives a strand of the Estonian literary tradition; each chapter contains a fragment of Estonian history. So yes, this is a book about a garden, but, as literary scholar Elle-Mari Talivee puts it, 'garden books always end up being about people'. ■



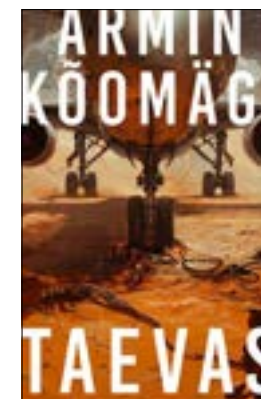


Review by Vilja Kiisler

The name Armin Kõomägi needs no introduction in Estonia. In 2006, he burst onto the literary scene when his very first published text won the coveted short story award with playful ease. Since then, each of his books has been eagerly awaited.

Published in 2015, *Lui Vutoon* received Estonia's most important novel prize and has since acquired cult status, even among young readers who are otherwise not particularly interested in literature. Anyone wishing to borrow it from the library must queue. The same applies to the novel *Taevas* (*Heaven*), published last year, which has become a bestseller.

*Heaven* was deliberately written to be a hit, with strong potential to appeal to an English-speaking audience. The story is simple and universally understandable: the inhabitants of Earth have turned life on the planet into hell, leaving no place for humanity. Where there is no war, there are nuclear tests, burning forests, or airports occupied by animals displaced from their habitats. Of course, Kõomägi exaggerates to show us the world we are heading towards – but his fantasy is no longer so far removed from reality.



ARMIN KÕOMÄGI  
*Heaven (Taevas)*, 2024  
Varrak, 240 pp.

The protagonist, who has lost his memory, has no choice but to redeem his ticket for the next flight immediately after landing, as the sky is the only safe place where he will not be instantly handcuffed or killed in yet another natural disaster.

Humanity, having destroyed the planet, has nothing better to do in the cabin of an aeroplane than to sizzle the last remaining prawns and kangaroos, pour alcohol, and stage drug-and-sex orgies, while the captain who once made announcements to the passengers is no longer on board. The human soul, left in orbit, may turn to the gods it has known so far – but they no longer take calls. There is nothing but emptiness and chaos, with no hope left for anything.

Despite this hopeless setting, the novel is written in such a way that it is both enjoyable and even fun to read: one eye weeps while the other laughs. Kõomägi's irony and sarcasm concerning humankind are cutting, but not without a healthy sense of humour and an appreciation of the grotesque. The story would be a perfect fit for the cinema – and hopefully it will find its way there soon. ■

THE AGE OF BOILED DEER by Piret Raud

# A FILTHY, **SLIMY** AGE

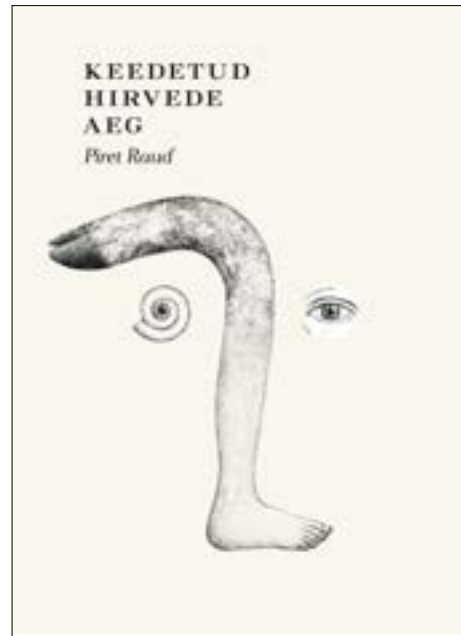
Review by Silvia Urgas

How to write about what is not said  
and about what does not exist?  
PIRET RAUD knows, although I am  
not sure about others.





PIRET RAUD  
*The Age of Boiled Deer*  
 (Keedetud hirvede aeg)  
 Tänapäev, 2024. 300 pp.



Raud's book has, in itself, a fairly clear story, one that can be retold in quite simple sentences. A young girl named Lill Aruvee is growing up in a house full of artists. Her father is a painter who has fallen into disfavour due to social change. The girl is bullied at school, and she does not know whether art is really for her. In terms of plot, then, this is a classic *Bildungsroman*, complete with descriptions of school and a first unhappy love.

Yet *Keedetud hirvede aeg* (*The Age of Boiled Deer*), in recounting this story, repeatedly slips into dream logic: people are bolonkas (or vice versa?); the nameless city is struck by biblical disasters ranging from fires to floods; from the porthole window hidden behind the doughnut-seller's stall a forbidden sea surges. Still, while reading, one feels

an irresistible temptation to see this dreamlike, nameless city as Tallinn and the timeframe as the last gasp of the Estonian SSR.

Not everything the reader encounters can be explained by common sense. Raud's world resembles that created by David Lynch. Through Raud's city streets and beneath its floorboards swims an inexplicable tension and evil that can only be conveyed through devices familiar from the subconscious. Lynch is an appropriate comparison also because, despite Raud's richly detailed language – which would inevitably suffer in any screen adaptation – the text unfolds as though it were a film. So vivid and powerful is the world Raud creates. She truly knows these characters and every hidden corner of the city.

A friend of mine, seeing the title of the book I was reading, reacted, 'Boiled deer ... revolting'. And indeed, the phrase 'boiled deer' is revolting, vile, slimy – something that should not exist at all. In the novel, the boiled deer remind Lill of the conformist, established works of the neighbouring artist Verlin, who has succumbed to the pressures of the age and allowed himself to be boiled through. What can one do? It was that kind of time.

Lill's own father's braver, unboiled art is hidden away in a basement locker where not even his daughter ever sees it. When a new time arrives (the open sea-border with its gulls and capitalism), another neighbour, Anderson, can calmly exhibit it in a gallery as his own. Because the art was underground, no one knows its true creator; the new era favours brazen frauds. Thus the coming of the new age (freedom, capitalism, the absence of censorship) is not unequivocally good – the former elite is simply replaced by another, and whoever wishes to belong must learn the rules of the new game.

Both Lill and her artist father take their art seriously; better not to engage in it at all than to make compromises and yield to external pressure. This does not mean it is painless or that it does not provoke envy to see others celebrated for adapting to the new world. Lill's father

**Lynch is an appropriate comparison also because, despite Raud's richly detailed language – which would inevitably suffer in any screen adaptation – the text unfolds as though it were a film.**

explained to her why a raw egg spins more slowly than a boiled one: because within the unboiled egg there may be life, and life is in every sense clumsier than death. *Keedetud hirvede aeg* (*The Age of Boiled Deer*) explores precisely this clumsiness, which life inevitably entails – especially when one tries to live it true to oneself, whatever that may mean in one's own time. Better to be clumsy than boiled. ■

A shortened version of a review published in *Vikerkaar* (2025/6).

PUNKTI ÜMBER (*Around a Point*, 2023)  
is the fourth novel by author, academic,  
historian and associate professor of  
intellectual history Meelis Friedenthal.

# A VIEW OF ETERNITY

Review by Märten Rattasepp





MEELIS FRIEDENTHAL  
*Punkti ümber (Around a Point)*  
 Varrak, 2023. 309 pp.

Friedenthal's approach to literature ranges from science fiction – *Kuldne aeg* (*Golden Age*, 2005) – to philosophically tempered historical fiction – *Mesilased* (*The Willow King*, 2012; English translation 2017, a notable and award-winning novel) – and *Inglite keel* (*The Language of Angels*, 2016). He has also published a collection of short stories titled *Kõik äratatakse ellu* (*Everyone Will Be Brought to Life*, 2020).

In my estimation, novels are where Friedenthal shines the most. His academic background grants a wealth of knowledge and sources, which he applies to create convincing verisimilitude within period-accurate fictional spaces. The balancing act of borrowings, quotations, references and intertexts may be challenging, but the result is a convincing polyphony, a symphony of life.

*Around a Point*, while heavily fictionalized, is inspired by the real life of Friedrich Jürgenson (1903–1987). As Friedrich lived through a whirlwind of great events, ideological disputes, wars and tragedies, so does Verdi, his fictional counterpart. Both Jürgensons pass through a life filled with suffering and death, and find themselves in liminal spaces – internally (between life and death) and in time and space.

The novel considers, among many other themes, the question of belonging: what it means to be a member of a culture, what it means to relocate to a 'foreign' culture and the challenges such circumstances entail. Verdi passes through several different cultural spheres, where languages, peoples, religions and histories collide. His liminality starts at birth, from having different national identities – a chasm that only deepens through his later status as a refugee.

The novel frames the refugee identity as a kind of departed person, a ghost torn from life, one who must perhaps accept their own death in order to begin living again. Verdi hopes to reach Estonia, a place with familial roots, but even this small country is a periphery, an intermediate area – the ancient historical-mythological Hyperborea – a border country. And borders are largely arbitrary, drawn throughout history by maniacs with too much power. So, where exactly is home? Perhaps it is not a place at all, but an act that requires choice and effort.

Yet the novel is not only about Verdi. Instead, it revolves around that void-like point in the title – a light-absorbing dot from whose gravitational pull nothing can escape. It is about nothingness and non-existence; about the end of matter, reality and being; about the underworld and the garden of paradise, whose terrifying presence has been perceived – and will continue to be perceived – by countless people: František Kupka, Kazimir Malevich, Edvard Munch, Wassily Kandinsky and many others – several of whom are mentioned in the book. In the case of trauma and tragedy – the existentially terrifying perception of the void – a question has revolved around the possibility of depiction. How can one even comprehend such events and then describe or draw them, without trivializing, without embellishment?

But the finale of the novel carries a life-affirming message, because Friedenthal writes life-affirming literature. The novel incorporates a demonstration of alternative paths in the life of Verdi Jürgenson and asks, in this sequence of possibilities, each of which leads to differing outcomes: which choices are the 'correct' choices? And it gives an answer: to choose according to your dreams, in the name of life itself. As people, we should

The novel frames the refugee identity as a kind of departed person, a ghost torn from life, one who must perhaps accept their own death in order to begin living again.

make the effort. Likewise, even though mimetic, 'realistic' art is incapable of capturing the full reality – just as the most authentic biography is not enough – we should all try to act in the name of life and try to leave a mark on everyone and everything that has existed.

The reality of the world revolves around a point that causes terror: the fear of death, of non-existence, of loss, of nothingness. But through acts of creation, of representation and preservation, we can give everything the right to life. There is always more truth and reality outside art – words, paintings, music, etc. – but we should still attempt to capture the facets and shards of a reality that cannot be fully comprehended or represented. It is a doomed endeavour to try to capture a singular reality anyway. We are the caretakers of meaning. ■

Review by Peeter Kormašov

# A SOBER GLANCE AT ESTONIAN LIFE

In one of his most personal works to date, Andrei Ivanov writes about his mother's final days and the impact of the war in Ukraine on Estonia's Russian-speaking community.

**P**äevad (*The Days*) is undoubtedly among Ivanov's more intimate novels. One can only imagine how harrowing it must have been to sort through the layers of culture and memory in his dying mother's flat. Those who have gone through a similar experience with a loved one will understand: returning to a life long ago left behind, walking once-familiar streets, leafing through photo albums, feeling anger and grief well up in turn ... The author makes no attempt to romanticize his youth.

Even in his earlier works, Ivanov's version of Kalamaja – a historic wooden-house district in Tallinn – has always been a

dark, criminal quarter, more reminiscent of early-20th-century slums than of the stylish neighbourhood it is often seen as today. There's no trace of the present-day charm one might expect from the area, or from Telliskivi, a now-gentrified former industrial district in Tallinn, which also appears in his books and is derided by him there as a symbol of hipsterism and superficiality – the bijou cafés and boutique shops have long since spread across Estonia and, indeed, the world.

Ivanov's Kalamaja is, of course, far more interesting – although there is something comforting about being able to walk through the neighbourhood today without constantly looking over one's shoulder as one would have in the 1990s and early 2000s. I agree with Sandra Jõgeva's review in Areen, where she claims that the real protagonist of the novel is Tallinn itself – a city rarely explored in depth in Estonian literature. The narrator's trajectory – from Sõle Street in a working-class district, through the medieval Old Town, to the vast Soviet-era housing estates of Lasnamäe – covers a significant stretch of the capital.

A person travelling by bus sees more than the typical urban Estonian, whose life unfolds mostly from behind a steering wheel in traffic. Shady characters, snot-grey weather outside the window – in short, reality. Ivanov records this shabbiness faithfully, exposing the class divides in Estonian life. There are also recollections of aimless wandering through the streets of Copenhagen – bringing to mind my own drifting through Berlin, where the pavement often felt like the most welcoming place of all.

I've mentioned this in a previous review of Ivanov's work, but it bears repeating: his greatest contribution to Estonian literature is his sobering, sideways glance at local life. He holds a mirror up to Estonians, revealing the shadow side of



ANDREI IVANOV

*Päevad* (*The Days*), 2025

Loomingu Raamatukogu, 184 pp.

their psyche. For Ivanov, the 1990s are not a time of nostalgia or retro parties, but a bleak chapter of artistic self-searching. At times, he was so alone that he invented an imaginary interlocutor.

Ivanov writes that his readers are not Russians, but Estonians. He is an Estonian writer through and through – especially following the outbreak of the war in Ukraine – and he even feels ashamed that he ever published anything in Russia. 'Fucking Rashists – you'll never wash off that disgrace,' says one of his friends in the book. The anger and shame felt by progressive Estonian Russians in response to the war has been acknowledged in the Estonian media, but for many Estonian Estonians it remains unfamiliar territory – another world entirely.

Above all, however, this is a novella about Ivanov and his mother, with the chaotic Tallinn of the early 2020s as a backdrop. Ivanov is a writer with a capital W; when reading him you can never detect the slightest whiff of self-promotion – as he puts it, 'I'll never understand materialists' – only a sincere desire to pour his feelings on to the page. ■



POEMS by ERNST ENNO

# UNHEARD

## THE HOME IS HUMMING

Translated by Mathura

## All Falling into Silence

All falling into silence  
around you, deep within.  
What's in the past is gone now,  
what's coming, beckoning.

Not dark, nor daylight either,  
upon a hillock where  
you've stopped, alone, observing,  
if there is something there.

The winds they go on talking  
high up above your head -  
without understanding  
you comprehend what's said.

And not yet understanding  
you look up, and behind -  
just sighing to yourself there,  
just sighing one more time.

All falling into silence  
around you, deep within.  
What's in the past is gone now,  
what's coming, beckoning.

ERNST ENNO (1875–1934) was a lyrical mystic of Estonian poetry. A selected collection of his work, *Unheard the Home Is Humming* (Allikaäärne, 2025), was recently published in Mathura's English translation.

## Love Everything!

Love everything, do!  
Like a string of a zither,  
ring hither and thither,  
a lover never will wither  
when asked straight  
to the heart:  
are you a rover,  
make yourself over  
into a light for the world.

Love everything, you,  
join everything, do!  
A rill to a stream goes,  
a stream to a river grows,  
all in one merging,  
increasing and surging  
to murmur and roar.  
A blessing will flower,  
the earth be empowered  
with might to deliver.

Konrad Mägi (1878–1925)  
*Landscape with Sun*  
Oil on cardboard, undated  
Art Museum of Estonia





Eduard Wiiralt (1898-1954)  
**Hell**

Etching, copper engraving, 1930  
Art Museum of Estonia

## EstLit. Estonian Literature

An annual English-language magazine  
dedicated to Estonian literature.

Print: ISSN 3059-8052  
Web: ISSN 3059-8060

The print edition is published each autumn,  
while the online edition is updated regularly  
throughout the year.

With thanks to the Art Museum of Estonia and  
Peeter Laurits for the rights to reproduce artworks.

[www.estonianliterature.ee](http://www.estonianliterature.ee)

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Design: Asko Künnap



Publisher:  
Estonian Literature Centre (ELIC)  
[www.estlit.ee](http://www.estlit.ee)



