ELM

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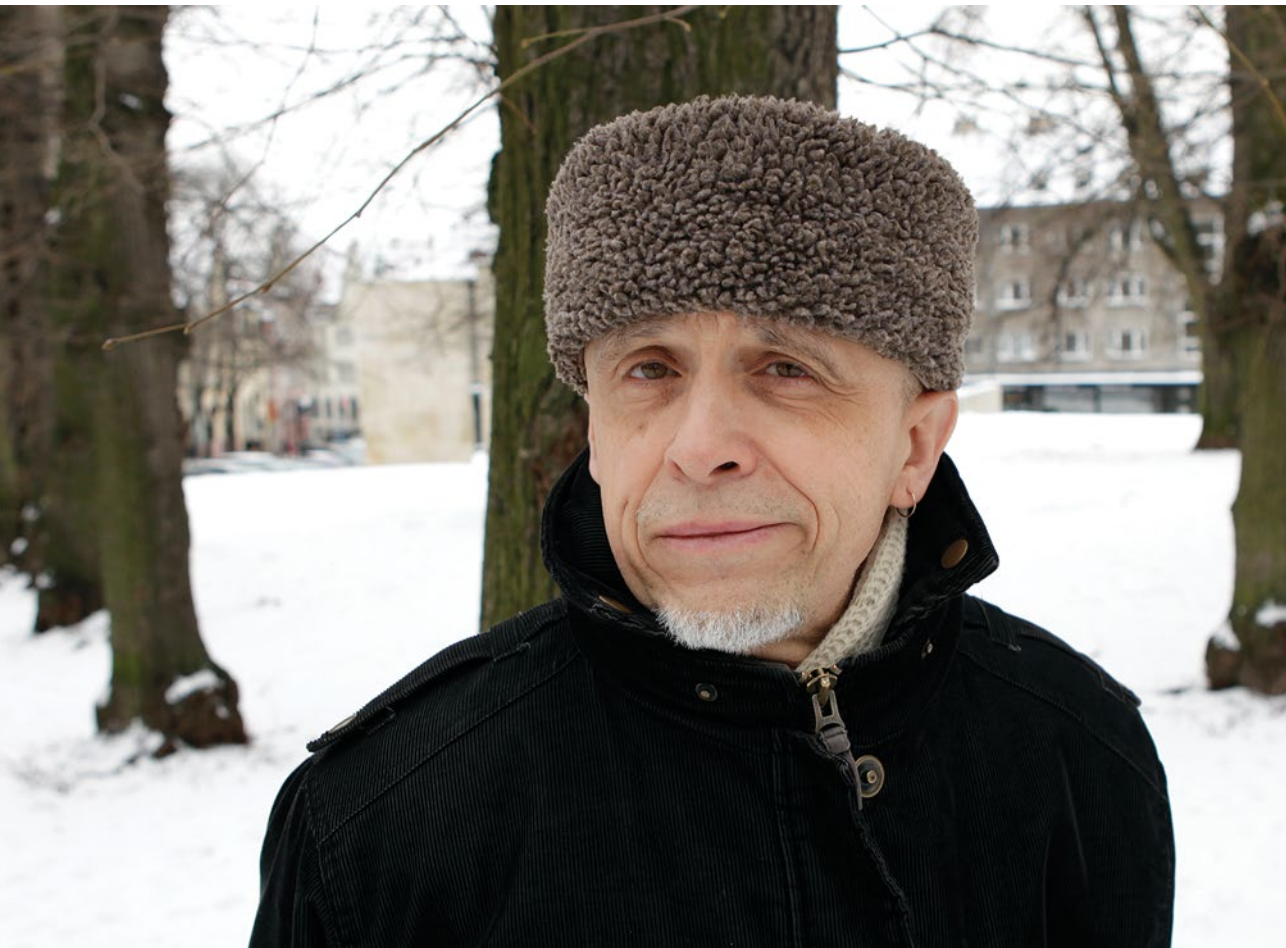

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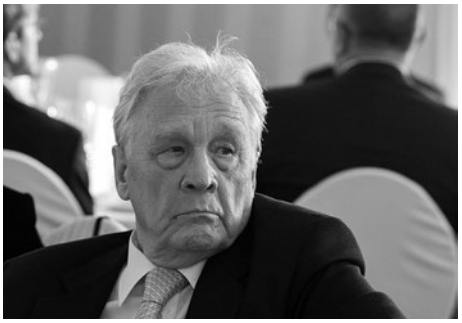

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Mihkel

recollections of a pleasant hell

The series of your books of memoirs ended with the sixth volume. More or less at the same time, various other memoirs were published. Now that the boom of this type of book has lasted for years, do you think the writers' turn has arrived?

Writers missed the moment. Who, after all, should write memoirs if not writers? They are by nature socially sensitive. But it did not occur to them that they could write in this genre. Writers clung to the modernist norms and kept asking themselves "what actually is literature?" Now they are gradually waking up, but I am not sure whether people are that keen on writers' memoirs any more. What are memoirs anyway? It is debatable.

It may be the case that many books of fiction to some extent constitute memoirs. Your own books, for example, are often intertwined with life.

That is of course true. I am not the type who tackles the distant past or future, but am by nature a "writer of the times".

Indeed. A reviewer once said: "On the whole, all Mihkel Mutt's novels reflect a certain era, and quite adequately too."

That is not completely true because I am not familiar with the social spectrum. I do not know precisely, for example, how people live in the countryside today. I have no idea what sort of life a family with many children lives … I only know what goes on in the minds of the intelligentsia, I know their experiences, mentality and life's intellectual side, and I can honestly describe all that. Therefore I do not write about everybody. There was a time in Estonian literature when a writer could fairly accurately write about problems that concerned the entire population. It is impossible to imagine today how a writer could write about everyone. My books are certainly not reliable sources for properly describing our society. They only produce a picture of how Estonian intellectuals live their lives.

You do not express your opinions that often in your memoirs, as descriptions form a more significant part. In the fifth volume, for example, you thoroughly examine the Tallinn pubs in the 1970s. Such things are much appreciated because they tell a lot about people.

It would be most welcome if someone would write about, say, cinemas in the way I have written about pubs. Or about any place where people congregate. Someone should recall what it felt like to go to a cinema. I would find it a thrilling read. The writer shouldn't be nostalgic, just convey the experience.

Mutt's

by Peeter Helme

It is of course possible to write a short story about every single pub, but is it necessary to actually do this fine carving work? The genre canons feel so restrictive. A kind of perfectly round realistic manner of description, which says that if I am writing about a pub, I must start, a la Balzac, with describing the door of the pub and tell the reader who made it. You can drift and drift, endlessly.

Occasionally it seems that it is better to just tell something, and that's that. Information overload is frustratingly immense. Why should I add to it?

Does that mean that you cannot be bothered to write more short stories?

Indeed not, at least for the moment. A fellow writer, Viivi Luik, once said something like: when I am facing a clean sheet and think for a while, the poem will certainly come.

Not because you force yourself, but if you do such things on a regular basis you merely are the person who writes that poem. You can also write a short story about anything. Somerset Maugham said that half an hour with any person would be enough for him to have a short story ready in his head. His only problem was that he did not manage to write all his short stories in his lifetime. He finally gave up and said there were already enough of them anyway. So yes, this skill just comes. Thus the reason I am not writing short stories now is not that I can not, but that I feel no need to do it.

What made you write your memoirs at such a young age?

Well, firstly I am very fond of Oskar Luts [Estonian writer and playwright, 1887-1953 – ed.]. Besides his famous Toots stories and other things he also wrote memoirs covering different periods of his life. That in itself was interesting. And I think that literary historians surely find this interesting as well: they can compare what was happening in the life of Luts and what was happening at the same time in literature. So I thought that it might be a good idea to get the literary historians busy. My work has not in fact been examined and there is hardly anything to be examined, to be honest: no innovations in form, and everything is spelt out directly. However, it is perhaps convenient to compare my memoirs and the latest novel, which tackles pretty much the same period as the memoirs, i.e. 1960–2010.

And then there is pure pleasure. As I like to read memoirs myself, I wrote mine hoping that there are other people like me.

I have mentioned before that I am extremely keen on history. I never studied history, but it is close to my heart. I get an almost erotic

pleasure in perceiving the course of time. In one of my books, for example, a character makes sure that certain things in his private life happen in such a way that he can look back decades later and reflect on what has come of them.

And what has come from one or another thing?

I am currently enjoying getting older. The older you get the more interesting everything becomes. It is great fun to observe how you change, and how others change too. It is not a gloating observation, but a pleasure. Cognitive pleasure compensates for the difficulties that the advancing years bring along: something has to be given up, some abilities diminish etc. The older I become, the happier I am …

One reason for writing memoirs is perhaps the fact that some time later it will be nice to think about how I wrote them. And it is also important to dig things up from the subconscious and bring them to light. Partly because of a wish to write a novel, and this required those subconscious things to be safely recorded.

One more thing: every person, every intellectual has a need to interfere in society and establish some sort of justice. History is the history of winners, but now when we all have achieved this great victory, we should not forget that even this history of winners in turn contains another history of a winner. I have no wish to refute anything or upset anyone's applecart, but there is enough intellectual honesty in me that I would like to show that nothing is ever one hundred per cent. Hell and paradise are never separate from each other in time and space. Maybe there was 1/3 good and 2/3 bad in the Soviet era. Now it is the other way round. I cannot stand it when someone says there is one hundred per cent bad or one hundred per cent good. This is childish thinking. That's what I want to say with my new novel.

I have noticed that you are quite sarcastic in your short stories and novels, but in your memoirs you seem to have mellowed or are equally sarcastic towards yourself and others. Was this a genre requirement or does this have something to do with age?

I would say both. The puppy cynicism and the need to be ironic about everything have certainly disappeared. Some of my readers have actually liked that most and they would like me to continue as before. Of course I could easily write exactly like that today, but it no longer satisfies me and I would just be repeating myself. After all, people should change and realise that the world does not consist of devils and angels; on the contrary, we all contain both.

Your memoirs include almost the entire set of people in Estonian culture from the 1960s until the 1980s.

I was able to write about them all only because everybody in the cultural field knew everybody else. They saw one another regularly and knew exactly what others were doing. Quite a bit happened in a certain notorious club in Tallinn. I met so many of these people there.

I cannot even begin to imagine today that one writer could socialise with so many visual artists as I did back then. And I was a theatre critic as well. I also had the advantage of knowing, to some extent, what was going on in the music world. My scope was therefore quite broad. All acquaintances led to other acquaintances. The people who turn up in my memoirs that I have talked with do not seem to mind at all that their lives are thus recorded.

My biggest fear was that the sense of unity, of belonging together, of the late 1970s and early 1980s, of which nothing remains today, would be forgotten and the next generations would know nothing about it. I am afraid when something is about to disappear without a trace.

Mihkel Mutt (Photo by Peeter Langovits / Scanpix)

The topic of unity is indeed fascinating. In your memoirs you describe people who spent a lot of time in the Kuku Club.

Is it still there?

Still there. But writers no longer socialise with artists.

I can believe that. They probably feel no need. Everything happens in the name of personal success, under the sign of ego-genius. There is nothing to oppose any more.

Perhaps this is what matters most. And if the writers wish they can always communicate with other writers in other countries.

However, fully understanding that every era is what it is, and ignoring the whole *résistance*-moment of the time, mutual enrichment really existed. My education in the art field improved remarkably, and it was very useful indeed. It seems to me that the intellectuals back then had a broader view of things or they knew the problems that everybody shared.

Some, of course, might say that we do not have that much unity or things in common: how to declare your income perhaps… Still, I have no regrets whatsoever at having gone through such hell as the time was back then. It was a pleasant hell.

Yours was among the few prose debuts in the early 1980s. You naturally had friends among older writers and younger ones arrived in the second half of the decade. But didn't you feel alone?

No, I didn't, because I somehow blended in with the previous generation. Quite a few reviews threw me in with the 1960s generation.

Didn't the fact that you associated so much with older writers justify the claim made about you so many times, that you were never a young writer.

Well, I have never really been a young person, and hence I was never a young writer. I actually was a young writer for a bit, because at secondary school I did want to become a writer. At that age most people have no talent for anything. And I was no exception.

If you have never been young, you will never be old either.

Precisely!

One follows automatically from the other. All manner of unexpected things may of course happen. After all, spirit depends on the body. But no, I have no fear of old age. I feel a bit sorry for those who do not understand that today's sixty is actually forty, both in terms of social choices and opportunities. Many are still convinced that a sixty-year-old must be an old codger. I'm sorry, but what sort of old codger am I!?

What parts of your memoirs did you like writing best?

In a way, everything felt good, although in the end I was exhausted. The first part came about because of a duty towards my ancestors. I already said that every era has its winners and losers. And I felt that I had to write about my grandfather, because he was not on the side of the winners. We have to respect our ancestors, and to me the stories of my great-grandparents are genuinely fascinating. Besides, I am an old-fashioned person: I think that we should know and honour our ancestors and not debase the family name.

This might sound like heaven knows what foreign language today, because now life starts from zero, from scratch. I observe with displeasure what people call themselves now: a person, for example, writing articles for newspapers, calls himself a "columnist", and at another time an "art historian". But what if I wrote — "Mihkel Mutt, gynaecologist". Can I be prosecuted according to Estonian laws?

Isn't the wish to define yourself by yourself a protest against the Soviet era, which homogenised people but kept records of the backgrounds of parents and grandparents?

A writer was someone who graduated from the Gorki Institute. This is of course the other extreme, but I do understand the reaction against it. Everybody wants to define himself, all sorts of people are now attaching the term "writer" to themselves. But what exactly have they written? Has anyone else besides that person and his friends said that he is a writer? No. At the same time nobody can claim that someone is not a writer. If I, for example, should say that such and such a person is not really a writer, the immediate verdict is "sour grapes, afraid of competition".

But how can a reader make a difference? I am not keen on hierarchies, but I nevertheless like to keep value criteria apart. You can't mix up everything. There are still masters and apprentices in every field. And in ever field these things are occasionally confused. Who then is responsible? People like you and me. As it is not possible to issue orders from above about who is who, the press has to be able to distinguish and must do it, so that people will listen.

This also concerns the discussion about what sort of books public libraries should have: people think they know what good literature is and can choose for themselves. I would ask: do you allow your children to wet their pants for as long as they live? Why do you train them, but think that there's no need to train yourself? It's the same thing.

People do not know how to use freedom, and free society only suits the intellectually sensible and the strong-willed.

Mihkel Mutt was born on 18 February 1953 in Tartu. He studied Estonian language and literature plus journalism at the University of Tartu, then worked as a literary critic and editor, literary consultant at a theatre, a freelance writer, at the Ministry for Foreign Affairs, and later at the cultural weekly Sirp and as editor in chief of the literary magazine Looming.

Mutt has written 31 books: novels, short stories and feuilletons, essays and children's literature. He has received several literary awards.

Mihkel Mutt's memoirs:

Mälestused I. Eesti doomino. Eelmälestused (Memoirs I. Estonian Domino. Pre-Reminiscence), Fabian, 2009. pp. 132

Mälestused II. Võru tänav. Lapsepõlv (Memoirs II. Võru Street. Childhood), Fabian, 2009. pp. 205

Mälestused III. Sitik sügab. Kooliaeg (Memoirs III. Chafer Scratches. School),Fabian, 2010. pp. 207

Mälestused IV. Kandilised sambad (Memoirs IV. Angular Pillars), Fabian, 2010. pp. 239

Mälestused V. Päiksepoolel (Memoirs V. On the Sunny Side), Fabian, 2011. pp. 247

Mälestused VI. Elukott (Memoirs VI. Sack of Life), Fabian, 2011. pp. 223

The article was first published on 10 February 2012 in *Eesti Ekspress*

Rhyme ar

Eda Ahi is an Estonian poet based in Tallinn. A winner of the Betti Alver Prize for best debut collection and the author of three poetry collections, she has established herself among the best in Estonian poetry. Translator Jayde Will had the chance to ask her about her latest book, rhyme and revolution.

I really enjoyed your recently-published third book *Julgeolek* (Security). After the first book, did you have an idea that you would continue publishing?

In effect I have experienced virtually the same kinds of ambivalent feelings after publishing each of my books. On the one hand, I feel a clear urge and necessity to put something else, something new into words and watch it form a certain compound, a story. On the other hand, I experience the perception of having drawn a curtain on something. Another stage has been concluded and it sort of brings forth the fear of not being able to write anything else, anything new. Needless to say, by now I know I am able to grab a pen and just write, but the question is whether my writing will evolve and be somehow meaningful, or just repetitive and empty. I guess conclusions of something are always fascinating and terrifying and the same time.

You're one of the few young Estonian poets I know that employs rhyme in their poetry – did this come naturally for you?

Yes, as paradoxical as it may sound, to me rhyme is a natural way of writing poetry. Poetry in general, but especially rhyme, are often associated with music and I clearly sense the connection. The music-like flow of a poem has always been of utmost importance to me, also when reading texts created by other writers. I believe a truly good poem captures or strikes the reader already during the first, rather superficial contact. Afterwards, one can read the poem again and discover other layers of meanings, and enjoy them consciously. I guess using rhyme is one way of attempting to achieve it, the path that I have taken for the time being. Nonetheless, I do not by any means believe this is the only way – in fact, it is much more difficult to write good free verse. Hopefully one day I will master that skill.

In your second and third books, I noticed a few themes that seem to come up a number of times, one being revolution or being a revolutionary. What is being a revolutionary for you?

It is interesting to see you point this theme out. I would not say that I address the topic of revolution directly. It is rather a framework

nd reason

Interview by Jayde Will

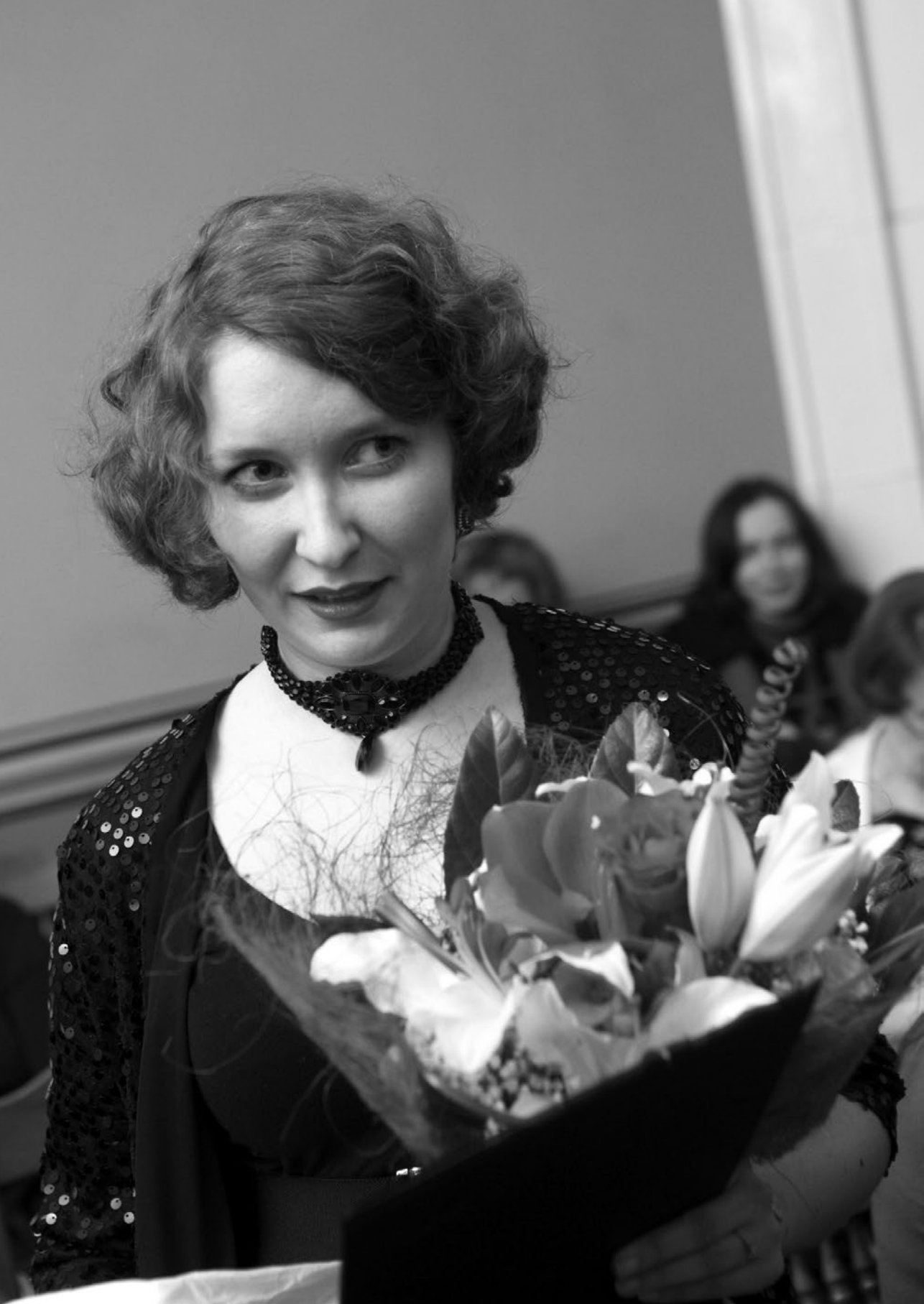
into which the main content is placed. Surely I am not as much interested in revolution *per se* as in a certain cult of revolution, the thirst for revolution and the associations that this concept creates. Of course, the concept itself has been devaluated over time – in everyday speech many things can be described as 'revolutionary' such as discoveries and inventions, events and deeds. Nevertheless, a much more primary and raw perception of the concept still appears to exist and continues to be romanticised and idealised. My poems that touch upon the topic can possibly seen as an answer to this tendency.

Another theme that comes up is Tallinn. I understand that it's your hometown, and it seems to have an influence on your poetry. Has your image of the city changed over the time you have been writing poetry?

It surely has – repeatedly so. And I think it is only natural. It has changed with moving to all the homes I have had in Tallinn, the trips abroad, a year-long flirtation with Tartu as well as by living in Italy. My perception of this place is also constantly changed by every tale I hear or read about my hometown. There is so much to discover in every place – we might not be conscious of the stories around us while moving along our everyday paths. And usually we are not. This only enhances the joy of surprise. At the same time, these changes are not only created by new discoveries, but also the fact that being away for some time probably teaches one to value the familiar. My image of Tallinn has certainly become more positive and cosy over time, regardless of the fact that the city might continue to often carry rather negative connotations in my poems. However, this is only logical: home is not necessarily the place where everything is jolly and perfect. Home is a place where one lives through good and bad times and gives one strength to overcome the latter. It is a place where all kinds of layers, sad and happy memories, co-exist.

Also there are numerous references to Russian classics mentioned in your work. From earlier interviews I understand that you have relatives in Russia and periodically travel there. What kind of experiences do you have there that are unique and can't really be experienced elsewhere?

It is true that there are numerous references to Russian culture in my poetry. At the same time I consider this fact to be rather arbitrary: I just happen to have Russian and Chuvash roots and have therefore had contacts with Russian culture from an early age. I do not advocate an overmystification of Russia and Russian culture and do not consider Russia to be 'a riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma'. Therefore it is neither fair nor correct to state that I have experienced something that cannot be experienced elsewhere. Even if there is something, I just do not have enough knowledge of 'elsewhere' to make such deductions. This



would imply an antecedent conviction of some cultures being more special than others, which – needless to say – I am not in possession of.

One other thing about your work is states of being or sudden decisions that have to be made – are you writing those poems almost right after something like that happens, or are you taking time and trying to find the details of those feelings you have during those sudden moments or decisions?

I rarely write poems about specific events of my personal life or about what I see or experience at a specific moment. I write down fragments or ideas and my consciousness records situations and moments, but their further fate cannot be foreseen. It is not guaranteed that each and every one of them eventually ends up in a poem. Although there are some exceptions to the rule, most of my poems mature over a longer time period. ‘

Are there particular topics that you want to write about, but have been difficult to put into words up until now?

Probably it is even more difficult to put into words what these topics are, but I can say that I surely hope there are as many as possible. This would mean that there are still many poems to be written.

To Odysseus

Troy was conquered by your horse, Odysseus
the sirens are still ringing in your ears
you have swam both in feces and waters so virtuous
I know that you posses genes so revered

your past is as crystal clear as the sea
though what you have done matters little to me
the present is an ocean, the rest merely foam
All I want to do is dance myself crazy
and sing as much as my lungs allow

so come, it is I that know of life’s elixirs
certainly the best that you will ever find
Odysseus, you try to grasp the world’s limits
But now I will show you where its true essence lies

Bang

I tend to repeat my despicable mess
I tend to repeat it as I stir it with ease
I truly and deeply love life’s tastelessness
Orchestra give me a booming chord please

There is not one bit of revolutionary in me
just a few restless legs and no more as you see
unable to stay put in one place for too long

signore, be careful with me and lest you forget
it’s with this same mouth that I kiss and I spit
if you call me a tramp be aware that you’re wrong

bang.

and suddenly I burst and finally throw you out

Translated by Jayde Will

Eda Ahi (Photo by Aldo Luud / Scanpix)

Ilmar

turns his talents to writing fiction

In 2011, Ilmar Taska surprised the Estonian literary world with his book *Parem kui elu* (Better than Life). Just three years later, he won the short story prize (Looming no. 10, 2013 – Estonia's oldest literary journal) for his novella *Pobeda*. His short story collection *Skönare än livet* was a critical success in Sweden in 2014 and was chosen by the Malmö City Library as one of the five best books of the autumn season. In 2015 he has been honoured once again, this time for his short story *Apartment to let,* which was selected as one of the best European short stories, to be published in Best European Fiction 2016. In the midst of these achievements, other creative muses, such as film, art, theatre and television, have bowed down before Taska's talents, which have reached far beyond Estonia's shores to Los Angeles, Stockholm, London, Moscow and elsewhere.

Having all these achievements in his curriculum vitae, it is thus even more interesting that he would turn his talents to writing fiction, a genre with which he seems completely comfortable. Ilmar Taska is a unique member of our literary landscape, an Estonian writer who can truly be considered international in terms of the scope of his work, since the breadth of his talent, both experientially and geographically, reaches beyond the boundaries of conventional writing.

Taska

by Hille Karm

Ilmar Taska is from a family of diplomats and artists who were deported to Russia during Stalin's repressive purges. He received his master's degree from the Moscow Film Institute (VGIK) and furthered his studies in Stockholm, as well as at Daniel Mann's Directing Master Class in Los Angeles. Among a variety of artistic venues, Taska has worked at Tallinnfilm, Swedish television, and several film companies and theatres. He has been a segment producer at an OSCAR show and co-written/produced a film for 20th Century Fox. In 1993 he established his own television company, which was the first privately held national network in Estonia.

Taska has worked in the hottest venues of the world of film and television, and has been privileged to breathe the same air as some of the greats in the world of film and theatre. Similarly, Ilmar Taska's heroes wander from one continent to another, crossing borders or travelling via the principles of magical reality through dream worlds from one dimension to another. They may come from a small town in Estonia or from Moscow, Budapest or Los Angeles. Since Taska himself has worked extensively with visual media, it is understandable that his prose is rich with the visual descriptions, necessary details and references he uses to create the atmosphere his stories embody. He has learned to use terse phraseology when writing for the screen and when developing scripts, something that he has had to do in Estonia, America, South America and elsewhere. Taska's storytelling is always gripping and his heroes colourful. The story lines never falter or digress and the protagonists are clearly defined.

Ilmar Taska's heroes are individuals who, while they may find themselves in crisis situations, are part of normal societal realms. They appear to be strong-willed and staunch, but underneath their activities and life struggles lurks a well of tragedy. It is there that it is possible to find absurdity hidden under a veil of sad humour. This is because contemporary society's models and ideals, whether in Hollywood, Moscow or Tallinn, don't seem to support lasting happiness, but only an ethereal glimpse of unreachable promises.

Through his heroes, Taska seems to ruminate on the theme of man vs. society: "One for all or all for one!" Who is going to get in whose way? His stories tend to be terse and yet fresh, and his sentence structure rhythmic and flowing. Minimalism is a virtue of Taska's short stories, where the tension of a situation isn't overwhelmed by a torrent of words; instead, decisive moments are marked clearly and accurately.

Sometimes, the reader is placed just a step or two ahead of the hero so as to join with him, unaware of the story's details or the twists and turns of the narrative.

Short novel

The hero of the autobiographical short novel *Better than Life* is a curious "fish out of water", who nevertheless learns to swim in Hollywood. This is a story of an East-European young man's pilgrimage and achievements in the film industry. Life behind the scenes or in the studio backyard is not always glamorous, although the game seems to be worth it every time, because artificial life is being produced here. Is it better than real life? Just as a scriptwriter and a producer must keep several projects going at the same time, the private life of the protagonist is full of back-up versions. He tries to manage his three parallel romantic relationships, along with everything in the constantly changing landscape of the film industry, threatened by striking guilds, economic crises and the absence of a template for success. The author reflects on the model of happiness. Dreams, too, constitute an impelling force, and fantasy enriches any form of life. If yearning implies knowledge and experience, dreams can be quite abstract. The author describes the fans who sit on camp stools waiting for their idols to arrive, but the idols are also tormented by existential competition, by an endless struggle for their own place in the sun. Although cinema offers a wonderful chance to take a brief holiday from mundane life, the chimneys of the illusion factory occasionally belch out black smoke. The novel contains both humour and self-irony.

Taska is not alienated from his heroes or their environment. He keeps swimming in the surrounding shoals, ready to take the bait or surface just for fun. It is a fascinating clash between different worlds and cultures in the illusionary entertainment industry.

The film critic Tiina Lokk wrote in a daily paper: "....The surprise of the year is definitely Ilmar Taska's book *Better than Life* ... Taska is such an enjoyably supple and stylish writer! He is a wonderful short story writer. His honesty towards himself is amazing. Not everyone could so dispassionately and bluntly describe the pain and effort necessary to make it in the huge world of film, especially when you come from nowhere and are a nobody."

Short stories

Ilmar Taska's collection of short stories, published in 2014 in Sweden, contains stories previously published in the literary journal *Looming* and in the collection *Better Than Life*. Quite a few of these stories were written on long flights from one continent to another. The book poses a question in its title: what raises the energy of our mundane life, makes it better and more enjoyable? Or does life take its own course and reality occur when we are still making plans?

Ilmar Taska's stories are not long, but their impact is lasting. He is truly excellent with words. The stories contain strange twists, unexpected punch-lines and underlying sadness, which indicate the author's sympathy or sensitivity. The protagonist is observed in precise short sentences. The stories have nothing excessive in them. Taska has remarked that each word and sentence must have a place, a role and a meaning. If the story as a whole loses nothing by discarding a sentence, the sentence must go.

In *Tidningen Kulturen*, the Swedish critic Professor Ivo Holmqvist wrote in his review: "...Taska undertakes a lot in a wide range... This pretty book is welcome literary news. The content varies from playful surrealism to serious realism. The last story about a small boy who says too much and is guilty of his father's disappearance, reflects the activities of informants and deportations in the Soviet-occupied Estonia."

Pobeda (A Car Called Victory) is set in Estonia, but could easily have been set in any other East-European country or even during McCarthy-era America. Not much has been written about how the state security systems used children. Taska's laconically told story is tense and moving.

The award-winning work has precise descriptions of the boy, with brief glimpses into his inner world. His thoughts and feelings are conveyed almost in a cool tone, although they evoke deep emotions. We recognise a child's curiosity and an adult's shrewd manipulations. Here, however, the game is more brutal than in the everyday child-parent educational, deceiving or manipulating games. This makes the situation inhuman. The counterpoint between the grey smoky home and the leather seats and sparkling chrome of the brand new car is shown with utmost precision. At the wheel of the car called Victory, the uncle tells the boy with seeming compassion: "Keep your eyes on the road!" to spare the child any trauma, although it only postpones the trauma. The security man thus does not get his hands dirty or witness the tragedy. He has skilfully avoided the accusation of deceiving the child. He can just whistle the Disney tune "Whistle while you work...", which ironically probably found its way to the country of workers and peasants through the trophy films acquired after invading Berlin.

Social-political irony is evident in the story *Lawrence of Arabia*, where a homeless war veteran tries to maintain a positive attitude. Having lost everything, he nevertheless refuses to admit defeat. His glass is always half full, not half empty, and the Hollywood sign is still significant to him. As the angel of death, Taska sends him the enemy army in Hollywood film costumes. "Am I on the right side, amongst my own?" asks the homeless Lawrence of his Arabian angel of death. However, in his situation the opposing sides have lost their semantic meaning, and warfare has become pointless.

In the story *Stop the Music,* Taska gives a considerably more emotional depiction of a person's inner life. The person in question is the young Tchaikovsky, whose inner life unfolds quickly and emotionally. The precision of sentences and descriptions is much in evidence here as well. The words are chosen to push the right buttons and are aimed at evoking emotions in readers. The writer's delicate finger touches the most sensitive nerves.

Both *Nocturnal Music* and *The Singapore Fish* are about the difference between sounds and languages, the alienation of communication, sounds that cannot be heard, i.e. low-frequency sounds, music that kills or low-frequency sounds used by fish. Both stories focus on sounds that are not understood or are unheard by the human ear. Ilmar Taska also seems to have a good grasp of the finer points of the achievements of today's technical world. *A Car Called Victory* and *Nocturnal Music* show victims of the miracles of technology. Obsession with new technology can be destructive.

In an earlier short story, *The Boy*, Taska plays with urbanistic alienation and existential sense and senselessness. Here, the "parents" of the dog-actor have found love and the family has found sublimation in their mortally ill dog. In the novella *Three Bears*, an opera prima donna has been caught in the cogwheels of a socialist society, where all human emotions and aspirations depend on ideological directives. Once again, Taska has keenly observed his characters as if through a hidden camera, occasionally penetrating into the deepest depths of their subconscious.

Ilmar Taska's short story *A Night Witch from Crimea* (2014) creates an evocative picture of the inhumanity of war. Seventeen-year-old girls have been sent into battle for Stalin: they have to throw bombs from slow training planes that are not equipped with parachutes.

Krister Enander writes in *Helsingbor Dagbladet*: "Ilmar Taska does not provide answers. His aim is to describe. He produces sharp outlines of questions and leaves the reader a chance to make up his own mind. This is refined simplicity; the writer convincingly and clearly demonstrates that a direct narrative and description are often the most effective way to give life and authenticity to characters."

Taska's story *An Apartment to Let*, included in Best European Fiction, is about loneliness in huge Moscow, where Lidia offers a flat that she never intends to rent out. The only purpose of her offer is to communicate with others and briefly escape her solitude. This is a fascinating character who, despite all of her difficulties and hardships, has not lost her sense of humour and human emotions. Her misfortune is that nobody appreciates how wonderful a cup of cocoa tastes in her cosy flat.

Ilmar Taska's heroes have created their own personal illusion factory, just like the blind Ray Charles, who can only see in a drug-induced haze or the DJ in Nocturnal Music who tests the limits of sounds inaudible to the human ear.

Many of his novellas would make excellent film scripts. In his film and TV work, Taska has obviously been involved with scripts. In his younger years he was a member of the Tallinnfilm editorial staff, where he edited some well-known Estonian films. The script for *Hotel of the Perished Alpinist* was commissioned from prominent Russian sci-fi writers, the Strugatski brothers. Contacts with the work of famous writers certainly influenced Taska, and this impact should not be underestimated. Studio Tallinnfilm also commissioned a script from Andrei Tarkovski and thus Taska had an opportunity to establish personal contacts with this great Russian as well. As a result, years later Taska directed a performance at the Russian Drama Theatre about the shooting of Tarkovski's last film in Sweden. The award-winning production is based on an Erland Josephson radio play, and the play is still performed for packed houses.

Ilmar Taska's contacts with the great figures in world cinema continued abroad, and encounters with such people inspired many short stories in the collection *Better than Life*.

Later, in Hollywood, Ilmar Taska developed film projects at Fries Entertainment and wrote the screenplay for the film *Back in the USSR*. This is a story of the experiences of a young American in the underbelly of perestroika-era Moscow. One of the leading roles was played by Roman Polanski.

In Estonia, he co-wrote and produced the film *Set Point.* In 2010 Taska produced the Italian-Spanish film *Thy Kingdom Come/ Wings of Fear.* The film critic James Ulmer wrote "The movie's artistic themes and painterly look seem to come naturally to Taska, who has directed a documentary of the life of the German painter Paul Wunderlich and whose own grandfather was a well-known Estonian artist."

Visual details and descriptions also seem crucial in Taska's prose. His film scripts and his fiction have similarities in shaping the structure in character development. However, despite his strong film background, Ilmar Taska has never in his short stories succumbed to worn-out stereotypes.

Ilmar Taska has certainly been successful in his television and film work, but his literary output has attracted just as much attention. Full stops, indentations and emotional disruptions in his stories are like turns and pauses, which form a music of restrained, tense words.

In the words of an Estonian culture critic: the reader should be grateful.

A car calle

The boy had to be quiet again. His father had frowned and said: ‘Don’t talk so loudly,’ just as he always did.

‘Let him talk,’ mother had intervened, ‘you’re the one who should be quiet, instead of booming on in that bass voice of yours.’

But what’s the point of talking on your own, thought the boy. If father is not allowed to answer, and mother doesn’t want to.

The room was dark and dismal. The boy climbed up onto the window ledge and peeked through the curtains. The street was also quite gloomy, and wet. But he could see hazy lights though the windows of the neighbouring building, and shadows moving around. People were running, playing, maybe even laughing there.

Mother said in a quiet, reproachful tone: ‘Draw the curtains shut again.’

The boy was sad that his father was glum, and his mother was always in a bad mood about something. She just bustled about all the time, cooking, washing up, ironing, cleaning the floors, darning the socks. Always in silence. She didn’t like it when the boy laughed, called out, or asked her questions. She liked it even less when father did. He was not allowed to talk at all. Or to go to the door or window. He was always hiding from everyone, although he still wouldn’t ever play hide and seek with the boy. He would be sitting or lying there in the back room, reading smelly old books. Once the boy found an old photo album, with pictures of mother and father laughing and looking beautiful.

‘Now you look completely different. Ugly,’ the boy had said, at which his mother had taken the album from him and put it up onto a high shelf, so that he couldn’t get hold of it any more.

‘I’m bored.’ the boy said to his father. His father just carried on smoking without lifting his gaze from the old journal with faded yellow pages.

‘If you want we can look at the old pictures of Estonian tanks and armoured vehicles,’ father said. But the boy had seen those pictures countless times before, he even knew the names of every armoured car off by heart.

‘Can I go out and play on the wood pile?’

‘Go on then,’ his father said, without raising his head.

‘But don’t go far from the house,’ his mother admonished, gesturing agitatedly with the iron.

The boy had already grabbed his cap and darted out into the crisp air. He climbed up onto the pile of wood on the other side of the street. He sat on a thick log which was thrusting out from the pile, and it swayed under his weight. At last he was back in the driver’s seat. He started up the engine, put the bus in gear, and felt it start moving under him. He rocked on the piece of wood as he drove along the pit-holed road, and the

ed Victory

by Ilmar Taska

noise of his bus got louder and louder as he changed gears. As he drove on, wrestling with the bumpy road, he noticed two headlights approaching from the other end of the road. A splendid shiny Victory car* was driving slowly in his direction. It was brand new, and beige coloured. 'Psss,' the boy pressed down onto the nail heads to open the bus doors. 'Final stop! All passengers please get off.'

The Victory had also stopped on the other side of the road. The boy climbed down from the pile of wood, and started walking towards it, his heart pounding with curiosity. He had seen handsome cars before, but none of them had been so new and shiny. A tall man in a grey overcoat was sitting in the car. He had noticed the boy too and was looking at him, smiling affably. But he didn't get out of the car or switch off the engine. The boy approached the car, appraising it confidently. He walked once around it, and then bent down at the back to sniff the smoke coming out of the silencer. Even the exhaust fumes smelt wonderful. The man wound down the window of the car and cocked his head out in the boy's direction: 'So do you want to be a mechanic?'

'No, a bus driver,' the boy answered.

'Then you're probably not very interested in cars then?'

The 'Victory' (Russian: 'Pobeda') was a passenger car produced in the Soviet Union between 1946 and 1958.

The boy walked alongside the car towards the man, rose on to tiptoe and peeked in through the window. There were colourful lights on the dashboard, and the seats were covered in leather.

'Do you want to get in?' asked the man with a friendly wink. The boy knew that he wasn't allowed to talk to strangers, but it was worth disobeying the rules to get to sit in a car like this. He could just sit there and say nothing, after all. The nice man opened the door, reached out a warm hand and pulled the boy onto the seat. He gave a crafty look and then made the dashboard lights blink on and off, just for fun. He laughed. His hair was nicely combed and he was clean-shaven, not like his father. It was hard to sit and be quiet when such a jolly man wanted to talk. And so they chatted a bit – about cars.

Then the man inquired: 'What's your name? Where do you live?' The boy didn't answer. His mother had forbidden him from answering questions like that. He didn't understand why, but his mother and father didn't let him talk with strangers at all. The boy reached out his hand and touched the steering wheel. It was cold, round and smooth. How good it would feel to hold a wheel like that, not like driving the bus made from logs. The man had read his thoughts, and, shifting to one side he said: 'Come and sit closer and take hold of the wheel, just like a proper bus driver.' The boy put both hands on the driving wheel and looked straight ahead through the windscreen. The man

pressed one of the buttons and suddenly the windscreen wipers started working. The boy yelped in surprise, and they both started laughing. The man took the boy's hand, pressed it down onto the button, and the windscreen wipers stopped.

'Now try yourself. Has your dad got a car, or does he use the bus?' the man asked.

'He doesn't go out at all,' the boy let slip, and looked straight at the man in alarm. But the nice man just smiled. He looked deep into the boy's eyes and said, as if to comfort him: 'Not all men are car fans like us.' This man can be trusted, the boy thought.

'My dad's only interested in tanks and armoured vehicles,' said the boy, but his mother's constant reproach started ringing in his ears, 'Don't ever talk to anyone about father.'

'Has your father ever driven in a tank?' the man asked inquisitively. 'What has he told you about them?'

The boy pressed his lips resolutely shut. He wasn't going to say anything more about that.

'Do you want to go for a drive?' the man asked.

'I want to, but I'm not allowed to,' the boy answered despondently. 'I have to go home now'.

The man was quiet for a moment. 'No problem, bus driver. We can always meet again some time.'

He looked at the boy encouragingly.

'Tomorrow evening you could sit at the steering wheel yourself. I'll teach you how to drive. Since your mother and father don't care much for cars, it can be our little secret!' He looked straight into the boy's eyes and asked 'Can you keep a secret?' The boy nodded with a serious expression on his face.

The man held out his large hand, took the boy's hand in his palm and gave it a firm squeeze.

'So it will be driver's talk, between the two of us,' he said. 'We'll meet here again tomorrow, if you can come.'

The man leaned across the boy and pushed the car door open, so that he could jump down from the seat.

The boy had not wanted to leave the warmth of the car. He could still feel the leather seat under him and the nice car smell in his nostrils. It was an unfamiliar aroma, a mixture of petrol, eau-de-cologne, leather seating and the fresh paint of the dashboard. He sidled slowly back towards home, stood still by the front door, and looked back. He saw the Victory glide past, slowly and almost silently. The boy knocked on the door. He heard the shuffling of his mother's slippers, followed by the clunk of her key in the lock, and then he saw one of her eyes peering through the chink of the doorway. 'So have you managed to catch a cold yet? Come and have your soup.'

The boy didn't answer. He wasn't cold, he and the nice man had been talking their driver's talk. It would be their secret.

He entered the room, fusty from cigarette smoke, smelling of a mixture of damp wood and broth. The stove was crackling away. Father half-opened the door of the back room.

'I'd like some soup too,' he said in a whisper.

The boy didn't know why his father wasn't as brave as that nice friendly man in that fancy car and why he always hid himself away in the back room when someone came round. Why they could never laugh together.

They ate their soup in silence.

'It's about your bed time,' mother said. And so the boy went to bed. He was sorry that he was not allowed to talk to his father about the car.

The next day the boy couldn't wait for the nice man to arrive. He sat on the pile of wood and could not take his gaze off the end of the road. Then he saw the familiar Victory slowly turning the corner onto his road. 'Citizen passengers. There is a fault with the bus. Everyone must now get off,' he said hurriedly, pressing the nail to open the door. The doors opened with a 'psss'. The boy jumped off the pile of wood and ran in the direction of the Victory. He saw the man's broad smile through the windscreen. The Victory braked, the door opened, and the man reached out his hand so that the boy could jump like a panther on to the leather seat. The car's familiar smell greeted him. It felt good to be here, in the warm.

'Great to see you again, bus driver!' the man said happily. 'Turn this here,' he said, pointing at a round knob on the dashboard. The boy reached out his hand and turned the knob. The radio came on. It had really good sound quality, and filled the whole of the car, not like the crackly radio at home. 'Let's now listen to a popular tune from the soloist of the Working People's Cultural Centre Vera Neelus' said the announcer jauntily. A woman sang 'Whistle While You Work' in a beautiful high voice. The boy looked at the man as he grinned proudly. They nodded their heads to the rhythm of the music.

A dark coloured van drove past, and the man's gaze followed it. The boy also watched the large vehicle as it came to a stop outside his house. Some men in leather jackets jumped out and made straight for the boy's front door, running. The man leaned in the boy's direction, pulled him closer, and said 'Let's do a short test drive now. Put your hands on the steering wheel, you can drive.' He lifted the boy onto his lap and pressed his hands onto the steering wheel. The boy grabbed hold of it. He could feel the man's feet moving under him. He pressed down on the clutch with one foot, and pushed the accelerator pedal with the other. The car slowly started moving. The boy turned the steering wheel, and the car actually responded. They drove past the van and his house. The boy looked in the direction of the building, but the man instructed him: 'Bus driver, keep your eyes on the road, look straight ahead of you!' The boy directed his gaze back onto the street. It felt so good to drive such a big, responsive car.

They drove past the neighbouring houses, turning on to a side street and driving round the block. On one bend the car tried to mount the pavement and the boy yelped in excitement. He felt the man's leg step on the brake pedal, and together they set the wheel straight again and carried on driving. The music played, and the car rolled on and on. And then they came full circle and arrived back home. The street was empty. The van had disappeared. The man braked right near the boy's house.

'You're a good driver,' the man said. 'Our work is done for the day.'

He reached out and gave the boy's hand a manly squeeze. The boy was happy. Now he was a real driver.

The man opened the door, and the boy climbed down from the seat and shut the door behind him with a slam. The man waved happily and drove off. The boy watched the red rear lights of the Victory receding into the distance, and sidled off towards his house. The door of his flat was ajar. He pushed it open and stepped inside. His mother was sitting on the floor. She looked terrible, her eyes swollen from crying, and her hair a mess. She reached out towards her son and hugged him close. He felt uncomfortable as she gripped him, shaking convulsively. He looked in the direction of the back room door, which was wide open. His father was nowhere to be seen.

'Father has gone out,' mother said.

Translated from Estonian by Matthew Hyde

Matthew

In the services of Estonian cultural diplomacy

My route to becoming a translator of Estonian literature was a long and winding one. I studied literature as part of my BA in Russian Studies at London University, completed in 1996. And I gained a postgraduate diploma specialising in literary translation from the Institute of Linguists, London. But life was to take me in another direction. After further postgraduate studies in politics I embarked on a career with the UK Foreign Office. First I worked as a researcher and analyst, then I moved into policy work, and then on to my dream posting as political secretary at the British Embassy in Moscow.

Although I had visited Tallinn fleetingly in 1997, it was in Moscow that I became more familiar with Estonia. The regular sauna party at the Estonian embassy in Moscow was the first diplomatic party I went to – nothing like seeing your colleagues naked to overcome barriers. And part of my job at the British embassy was covering Russia's policies towards its 'near abroad', so in April 2007 I found myself busy dealing with the repercussions of the Bronze Soldier events – which included showing solidarity with our Estonian colleagues who came literally under siege at their embassy in Moscow. Not the first, and certainly not the last example of close bilateral cooperation between our two countries in times of need.

A couple of years later, my career brought me to Tallinn, where I worked for three years as Deputy Head of the British Embassy. My first encounters with the Estonian language and literature were not fortuitous. I had studied the language for a couple of months intensively in London between postings, which gave me a good grounding in the grammar, but on arrival in Tallinn I found I was sorely lacking in words (this may have been partly because the teaching materials had included atmospheric Estonian films where no one seemed to say very much). Seeking to correct the situation I procured a copy of the formidable Saagpakk dictionary, and copies of Kivirähk's *Rehepapp* in Estonian and in Russian translation, believing I could put my knowledge of the

Hyde

latter to the service of learning the former – a nice idea which was doomed to failure. The pressures of work and the fact that most Estonians treated my attempts at speaking their language as cute, entertaining, but ultimately pointless (or worse) meant that I spent my first three years in Estonia speaking English and Russian.

But I was determined not to be beaten. In June 2012 I took the decision, for several different reasons, to take some time out from the Diplomatic Service. One of my major projects in that 'year out' (which has become two and counting…) was to learn Estonian. I subjected myself to a gruelling daily regimen attempting to somehow make a large volume of entirely alien-sounding vocabulary take purchase in my poor grey matter – and my long-suffering Estonian partner to equally gruelling trials of the results. The Estonian media became one of my sources for learning – I was an easy target for *Pealinn*, since it was delivered to our flat free of charge and written in an accessible style (my views on Estonian politics may perhaps never be the same again).

But craving something a little more intellectually stimulating, I decided to make a second attempt at Estonian literature - although some may question if the two books which stand out from that period really qualify for the term. The first, because it is not fiction but autobiography, and the second because it was originally written in Russian, by a Russian born in Estonia. Andrei Khvostov's *Sillamäe Passion* gripped me with its account of a side of Estonian life temporally and geographically hidden from the mainstream, which seemed somehow both familiar and exotic to me. Although my basic Estonian had me reaching for the dictionary almost every sentence, Khvostov's lucid and honest style, and his humorous and touching account of his childhood in Soviet Estonia, was compelling reading. The second book was Andrei Ivanov's *Handful of Dust*, which I read in Estonian because it was not available in Russian. Again this tells a story of a side of Estonian life which is often hidden from view, because the main protagonists are local Russians - although it is of course primarily a story about contemporary Estonian society, and in my view certainly qualifies as Estonian literature.

One of my other main sources for learning Estonian was Kuku radio. And one day in early 2013, somewhere between the latest instalment of Küllo Arjakas' unique brand of literary analysis, and the listeners' phone-in on the topic of the day (which always convinced me I would never master Estonian), I heard a report quoting Foreign Minister Urmas Paet, in which he praised the important contribution which literary translators make to spreading Estonian culture abroad. I was struck by this for two reasons. Firstly, I was surprised that the work of literary translators should be so

highly valued as to merit mention from such exalted lips (I certainly couldn't imagine the British Foreign Secretary saying anything similar). And secondly, since literary translators normally work only into their native language, I realised that the people that Paet referred to were people just like me – foreigners who had learned Estonian and survived to tell the tale; who could these people be?

As it turned out, Paet's words proved to be a message from a past life pointing me in the direction of a new one. A short while later, Tiina Randviir at the Estonian Institute kindly put me in touch with Ilvi Liive and Kerti Tergem at the Estonian Literature Information Centre (ELIC), and now, two years after the seed of the idea first appeared, my translations of Estonian literature are starting to appear in publication, and I am proud to have joined the ranks of translators to whom Paet was referring. A short story by Rein Raud, the *Demise of Engineer G*, appeared in the 2015 edition of Dalkey Archive's Best European Fiction anthology. A short story by Ilmar Taska, *Apartment to Let* has similarly been accepted for Best European Fiction 2016. I am soon to submit a collection of short stories by Toomas Vint for publication by Dalkey Archive in 2015. And Pushkin Press has contracted me to translate Meelis Friedenthal's *The Bees* for publication in early 2016.

I have very much enjoyed, for different reasons, all of the translation which I have done so far. One of the features of Estonian literature is that very few writers can afford to solely write – so their work is often enriched by influences from other activities – Toomas Vint is of course also an artist, Ilmar Taska is a film producer and director, Meelis Friedenthal and Rein Raud are both academics. Similarly very few Estonian writers write in order to achieve fame and fortune – the readership and print runs are too small - so they have to have real passion to want to do it. I've been fortunate enough to meet, and work closely with some of the writers I have translated. When it works well, cooperation can be very rewarding – a triumph of the collective creative endeavour over individual egotism, which requires full respect for the other party's area of competence, as well as willingness to forgo a little bit of control over one's own. Although of course the translator is nothing without the work to be translated, it is also true that the work does not exist for the rest of the world until translated into other languages, and so the translator plays an invaluable and privileged role, giving the work a new life, and bringing it to new readers.

Although prospective publishers sometimes ask me for views about the likely appeal of a given work to English-speaking readers, I don't yet feel ready to give an over-arching characterisation of Estonian literature – if such were anyway possible, given the great variety. One feature of life in Estonia is that foreigners' views about the country are sometimes given more attention than they deserve, even if they are not particularly qualified to comment. Linked to this is a certain sensitiveness, whereby even constructive criticism can sometimes be taken quite sorely as condemnation of the very concept of Estonia, particularly if it comes from a representative of a larger country. Although I can't help making comparisons between Estonia and the UK (and indeed Russia, given it is one of the three countries which I am familiar with), this helps to inform my understanding of all three, and often results in me finding my own home country sadly lacking in some areas (even if of course we do happen to have a pretty strong literary tradition).

Although culture and language are inseparable parts of any country's self-awareness and outward identity, as an outsider in Estonia I get the impression that they have a particularly important role to play here, in particular since this national identity – indeed the nation itself - has been under threat for much of its history. Although Estonia is currently securer than

it has been at previous historical junctures, existential angst understandably persists. Estonia's relatively small size is often cited as a reason (or excuse) for all sorts of things where it seems to have little direct relevance, including in the cultural sphere. Here I'm inclined to agree with Yuri Lotman (himself a representative of a larger nation, and one with strong literary traditions) who, based in Tartu, argued that there is no such thing as big or small cultures – they are all of equal value. By the same token, one cannot plead a special case for Estonia simply because it is Estonia. English-speaking readers are primarily interested in good quality writing which speaks to them on universal human themes – regardless of where it is from.

The idea of Estonian differentness, or 'exceptionalism', is something which one encounters frequently as a foreigner living here. One example is the amazement which I often encounter from Estonians when they discover that I can speak Estonian, as if it were nothing short of a miracle. Foreigners who have learned Estonian to varying levels are rolled out as prime attractions on Estonian television at regular intervals, and were the subject of a recent series of articles in one Estonian weekly. Even official government policy enshrines the assumption that foreigners can't or don't need to achieve mastery of the language (it is not possible to sit a test in Estonian at C2, the highest level, only C1, the second highest level under the Council of Europe System). Interlocutors often seem amazed at my knowing seemingly ordinary words – two recent examples were '*suvila*' and 'säästlik'. Fairly standard vocabulary if you have been in Estonia in the summer and live near one of the well-known discount supermarkets, and fortunately dictionaries exist for the really obscure terms.

I experienced a magnified version of this attitude towards learners of the language when I first considered becoming a translator from Estonian. An Estonian colleague assured me that this was an impossible undertaking – Estonian had so many unique quirks that only a native speaker could really understand and translate it (there are of course many Estonian translators who work out of Estonian into foreign languages). Someone else asked me how I could possibly manage to translate a language in which one word sometimes had different meanings (!). Of course Estonian is fairly difficult to learn for native English speakers, because the languages are so different. But it is not uniquely nor impossibly so, given a little application and the right environment (which includes support from Estonians themselves).

I would argue that understanding the language of the original text is anyway less than half of the challenge of translating – finding the best way to convey all the nuances of the meaning in English is more difficult. Every successfully translated sentence therefore feels like a minor victory which proves that it is possible to talk about the same things in English that Estonians talk about in Estonian; a victory which demonstrates our underlying similarities despite the surface differences.

However, working as a translator here has also accentuated the occasionally strange experience of being a native English speaker in Estonia. Estonia has obviously embraced the phenomenon of global English wholeheartedly, and the standard of English here is generally excellent – so much so that some Estonian writers have translated their own work and have even written in English. Given that there are so many variants of English around the world, spoken by native and non-native speakers alike, is it possible to talk about there being a 'right' English any more? Maybe Homer Simpson had a point when he argued 'who needs English, I'm never going to England.' Inevitably, however, the English which I use is the language I grew up speaking and was educated in, in England. One of the pleasures of translation is that it gives me

a daily opportunity to refresh and deepen my relationship with my native language, which otherwise I now use very little here (even one of the other Estonian-English translators based here in Tallinn, an American, speaks to me in Estonian now – much to the bewilderment of Estonians in earshot, I'm sure.).

The transition from my former work to becoming a translator of Estonian literature nevertheless seemed like a fairly natural one. Of course there has always been a strong tie between translation and diplomacy, dating back at least as far the Dragomans. The roles have now become more separate – foreign ministries still employ translators, and their work is vital to international diplomacy, but they tend to be in the background, only coming to attention when something goes wrong. As for British diplomats, their foreign language skills are general fairly patchy, given that their interlocutors often speak excellent English – certainly I was not required to speak Estonian when working in the Embassy here. But there are interesting parallels between the two professions on the conceptual level. I feel very aware, as a literary translator, of operating at the meeting point between two cultures, negotiating their similarities and differences in order to facilitate mutual understanding. The difference is that my allegiances have switched and I am now representing Estonian culture to the rest of the world rather than the British government in Estonia. That said, in the translation process it is vital to remain loyal to the English language, as well as to the original text. Diplomats who became too attached to their host countries used to be accused of 'going native' – something which of course needs to be avoided in translation.

The Third International Congress of Literary Translators which took place in Moscow in September last year focussed specifically on this question of translation as a form of cultural diplomacy, and concluded that literary translation has the power to do more than diplomats to foster mutual understanding between cultures, especially when political relations are fraught. Translation has certainly given me something which diplomacy did not. Diplomats tend to exist in something of a 'bubble', gaining only a fairly superficial understanding of the countries they are posted to, moving on every three years or so. The international image which countries present can also be fairly one dimensional and aspirational in nature. Estonia's image as a successful, liberal, Nordic 'e-state' is of course only part of the picture. Estonian literature has given me an understanding of the country which is deeper, more complex, more honest, and sometimes not as glossy.

The Estonia which I have discovered through what I have read so far is often quite a dark, gloomy, and bleak place. The sense of humour is often black, even macabre, and surreal. The countryside is often a major presence in the literature, and of course in the metaphorical world of the '*maa keel*'. Although the natural world can be harsh and forbidding, at other times it has a pristine, intense, almost overpowering beauty. Estonian literature often deals with the multiple historical and social layers which can otherwise be hidden from view, and the notion of the country as a cultural crossing point. Questions of identity are of course central in Estonian literature – the protection and assertion of a national identity, as well as the identities of minorities living within Estonian society.

This question of identity has a personal resonance for me, given that my path to Estonian literary translation has been inseparably tied to the transition to a new life in Estonia. Like many foreigners here I have felt that certain aspects of Estonian society and culture are somewhat closed to outsiders, so much so that I have occasionally had the odd feeling that I am not really living in Estonia as such, but in

a separate parallel reality which one might dub '*mitte Eesti*'. Certainly, many Estonians still seem surprised that a foreigner would choose to live here at all, and that they would want to do so as a normal member of society, in the same way as an Estonian. I therefore can't help seeing a (welcome) irony in the fact that as a literary translator I, an outsider, am permitted into the sacred inner domain of Estonian culture, allowed to touch it with my hands, to take it to pieces, to reconstruct it in a new form, and to present it to the rest of the world. Translating Estonian literature has given me a sense of belonging in this country which I otherwise would not have, and I am very grateful for that.

The lure of the exotic, and of feeling oneself to be exotic, can often be what draws people to foreign languages and cultures. Looking at some of the stories of an earlier generation of translators in the ELIC publication 'Estonia: found in translation', I get the impression that some (particularly if they were coming via Finnish) were drawn to Estonia because, labouring behind the Iron Curtain, it was mysterious and exciting – as well as being in need of outside support. In contrast, I first got to know Estonia as an EU ally – an independent and equal member of the international community. The UK's and Estonia's political positions were invariably very close, and due to EU seating arrangements we always sat next to each other in meetings. Coming here after three years in Russia felt like an escape from an environment which was sometimes a little too exotic, back to 'normality', and, as it turned out, back 'home'. Living here permanently now, normality is something to be prized, even if the language and literature can still provide a welcome dose of culture shock.

So I look forward to continuing the twin projects of translating more Estonian literature, and assimilating further into Estonian life. Fittingly, Estonia will be co-hosting the London Book Fair in 2018, and there are a number of important Estonian works which need to be translated by then - and I'm sure that over the intervening period Estonian writers will be busy producing more. In fact, inspired by my recent experiences, and some of my encounters with Estonian authors, I plan to try my own hand at writing, and I hope one day to make my own contribution to Estonian literature. I will be looking for a good translator.

Arvo Valton

on this side of infinity

by Rein Veidemann

Even small language areas can easily contain great literary cultures, with their own classics who have symbolic value. One such writer in the second half of the 20th century in Estonian literature is Arvo Valton, born on 14 December 1935. The sheer bulk of his output – his Collected Works consist of twenty four volumes! – puts him ahead of the central writer of Estonian literature, A. H. Tammsaare, whose total work fits into seventeen volumes. (However, the most prolific writer in the history of Estonian literature is still Eduard Vilde, whose Collected Works were published in thirty-three volumes.) Arvo Vallikivi (Arvo Valton is his pen name) is a mining engineer by profession, and is thus well aware that there is a lot of scree mixed in with the ore, and it is always possible that someone might find a nugget of gold.

Valton's entry into literature was explosive. His collections of short stories *A Peculiar Wish* (*Veider soov*, 1963), *Between Wheels* (*Rataste vahel*, 1966) and especially *Eight Japanese Women* (*Kaheksa jaapanlannat*, 1968) not only constituted a triumph of modernist short story writing, but caused an ideological earthquake in Soviet Estonia at the end of the 1960s. The alienation of human activity in a rigidly prescribed system, to which Valton opposed existence as a genuine, real being: such a treatment of life and literature was then considered as mocking the official doctrine and as an import of the capitalist West. Now that Estonia has once again lived under capitalism for a quarter of a century, Valton's short stories of that period are worth rereading, in order to understand how topical their message sounds today. "A small person" always has to face the system, and can easily get caught between the wheels.

Parabolic language, the absurd, and surreal elements: all of these are involved when we talk about Valton and his typical prose.

One of the highlights of his earlier creative period is the novella *Mustamäe Love* (*Mustamäe armastus*, 1978). Considering how marriages are arranged today on the internet and that women allegedly get pregnant and even give birth virtually, Valton's *Mustamäe Love* seems wholly prophetic, with its depiction of a near-absurd, distant relationship.

Valton's first novel was *Road to the Other End of Infinity* (Tee lõpmatuse teise otsa, 1978), a historical-philosophical novel about Genghis Khan and the Tao monk Chang Chun. This is one the books that I have read many times, and I have scribbled notes and exclamation marks in the margins. Since then Valton has provided readers with numerous novels, short stories, novellas, aphorisms and poems. He has written film scripts (including for the cult film The Last Relic), plays and libretti. He has translated from Russian, Mari, Komi, Udmurt, Moksha, Bulgarian, Polish and Hungarian literature. He has penned dozens of articles on topical political issues. Indeed, he has been a national politician and fought tirelessly against the planned phosphorite mines in Estonia in 1987. Valton's political nationalism has been fuelled by his own background: in 1949 he was deported, together with his parents, to Siberia. He finished secondary school in Magadan and was only able to return to Estonia after Stalin's death in 1953. The life of the deported people in Siberia is depicted in the novel *Depression and Hope* (*Masendus ja lootus*, 1989), which contains autobiographical elements. As a lecturer at Tallinn University, Valton helps to maintain a constant flow of people interested in Finno-Ugric culture. Valton is a living bridge to the kindred peoples struggling to keep their identity in hostile Russia.

Valton is an institution, an independent dissident, always ready for controversy. He cannot stand any classifications. He is doubtful about the idea of generations in literature, which like all creative work, is a highly individual realisation of life. However, there is something to the idea of generations, because in the mid-1960s Estonian literature was enriched by a wave of talented writers: Paul-Eerik Rummo, Mats Traat, Hando Runnel, Jaan Kaplinski, Viivi Luik, Andres Ehin, Enn Vetemaa, Mati Unt, Teet Kallas and Arvo Valton. No prose writers equal in stature to Traat, Vetemaa, Unt, Kallas and Valton have emerged in subsequent decades. This was the second era of modernisation of Estonian literature, after the early 20th century *Sturm und Drang* of the literary group Young Estonia.

Valton and his generation found themselves in two contexts. On the one hand, Estonian culture functioned under the Soviet regime as a means of intellectual resistance. On the other hand, there was the shadow life: literature and theatre were the fields of art where natural and obvious themes of the free Western society were examined, although only through hints and allusions. Valton's intriguing pattern of thinking can be seen, for example, in his discussion of short stories in 2000 (A. Valton. Minu novellikäsitlus. – Taasleitud aeg. Tartu ülikooli eesti kirjanduse õppetooli toimetised, no. 2, Tartu, 2000, pp. 18–23).

Valton is one of the greatest innovators of the short story. Although he has also written novels, he regards ninety per cent of them as not being literature. According to him, literature is an art of words, born out of synergy. For him, poetry and novellas are the "engines" of this art of words. In his theory of short stories, he distinguishes four layers that ensure quality as a feature of all good literature: a real sequence of events, opportunities for associations, symbols and the presence of the author. Here, Valton admits the significance of his own experience: "If I justify a short story in regard to a novel, it is obviously also a self-justification: I have written a few novels, but they are not quite the real thing. Perhaps I write short stories because of my character. I seem to be a

Arvo Valton (Photo by Arno Saar / Scanpix)

rather restless person. I quickly get bored with something, wishing to finish it off as soon as possible while hoping to achieve a kind of entirety, which is so much easier than in a novel."

Half of the last, 470-page volume of *Collected Works* (2014) consists of the chapter *Recollections*, which contains a discussion of why Valton actually undertook the fifteen-year project (the first volume came out in 1999). "My life work is now done," was the writer's reply. And he continues: "Would anyone pick up these books at a time when most literature is digital, on the internet or in an e-book? At the moment I am not bothered by that. Or perhaps only a little bit and with self-irony: I seem like the last caveman with my book series."

Indeed, it would be interesting to know how many readers there are in Estonia who would fill their bookshelves at home – if they still exist! – with Valton's series of books. Who else would already be there, waiting for Valton? The already mentioned Estonian literary classics, some authors of Russian and foreign literature, such as Leo Tolstoy, Anton Chekhov, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Shakespeare, Honoré de Balzac, Nobel authors, collections of several Estonian poets and some other popular series.

However, I am afraid that such reading material in Estonian homes is gradually disappearing. In the first decades of the new millennium, the era of Writers and Literature seems to be over. I capitalise both words, Writers and Literature, to indicate their significance for several earlier Estonian generations, who have already or are about to depart from life.

There have probably never been so many individuals in Estonia who call themselves, or have been called, "writers" but whose fame largely rests on their media images rather than on their creative work and the appreciation of a wider readership. The same is true of literature: it is increasingly difficult to compile an overview of all the annual publications because of the enormous bulk, although at the same time more demanding readers and critics voice their expectations of quality literature, their desire for the big Estonian novel (big in terms of narrative).

This kind of thing is certainly possible, as evident in the work of translators who have provided Estonian readers with truly great Literature from other countries.

Arvo Valton's contribution as a prose writer has been outstanding since the 1960s. Although he now sees himself as the "last caveman" – referring to his book series as "the last heroic deed of a conventional man" – it is by no means true that literature is in danger of extinction. The author expresses the hope that the era of literature will return, including the era of great Literature. I fully agree.

Arvo Valton's restless and prolific spirit seems to claim that our duties are on this side of infinity, or quoting Valton's novel *Road to the Other End of Infinity* (*Tee lõpmatuse teise otsa*): "None of us will live until the end of time, but immortality does not mean that we do not die /- - - / time and again people look around in fear and find an old interesting consolation and browse through books to track down signs that can help us here and now."

Autumn literary tours

by Eeva Park

"When the birds leave, the writers arrive; a new system, right?" This was the welcome to four writers who stepped off a bus in southern Estonia with the aim of meeting their readers in a library. It was the first literary tour organised in 2004. And indeed, just like flights of migrating geese always evoke a desire to go with them, the literary tours, now ten years old, always make me eager to go along, take part again, visit parts of Estonia where I have never been before, and other places where I have merely passed through, meet readers and, most importantly, make sure they still exist.

Eeva Park (Photo by Piret Raud)

The background to the literary tours, however, is not quite a pastoral idyll. Instead, it is based on fierce disputes, occasionally descending into unpleasant rows; a significant row was unleashed, as far as I can remember, by an article by Valle-Sten Maiste published in the weekly cultural paper (Sirp) in 2004. The article was extremely critical of libraries. A few years later the same author published another article about the mentality of "tittytainment" allegedly reigning in our libraries. The term was coined by Zbigniew Brzezinski and refers to the general degeneration and ignorance of humankind, or in other words to the phenomenon *which in a layered elite society helps to fill the time of the masses who are cut off from social life*.

Another opinion was that librarians had no sense of mission concerning domestic literature, and that they did not know or convey to readers new Estonian literature. Such opinions obviously caused great annoyance in libraries, but also showed that changes were called for as was the need for closer contacts.

It is no surprise that the Estonian librarians felt insulted by these comments, although it was clear that in the newly independent country the crucial aim was to increase the number of readers in libraries. As a result, the shelves were bursting with books meant purely for entertainment, i.e. precisely the works that could be called "tittytainment", which people could easily purchase from bookshops themselves.

The issue was certainly not about banning anything, but deciding what the state should sensibly and necessarily support.

Maire Liivamets, a librarian, professional reader and one of our few thorough and constant literary bloggers, managed to find a practical solution, and the idea of literary tours emerged.

“Literature needs closeness” was the message from the then chairman of the Writers’ Union, and largely thanks to him events began to develop quite rapidly: in 2004 the writers undertook the first tour of libraries across the country.

Together with the writers Leelo Tungal, Jan Kaus and Urmas Vadi, I was privileged to participate in the first undertaking. Quoting Vadi in a daily newspaper in October 2004:

Inevitably, *you see in your mind’s eye a documentary about a popular band on their way to concerts, with Madonna, Europe or Rolling Stones written on their coach. What, then, should we write on our bus? If we want to be laconic and precise, the bus could be adorned with: “Writers!” That would make things clear, but at the same time would allow for other interpretations, other phenomena, texts and people. Still, what would writers on the bus think and what would people in village libraries think. It’s a matter of whether we want to understand the whole thing: this is the question, albeit a banal one*.

This question is still relevant, as is another one about the inability to have a proper overview of literature in a situation where so much is being published all the time; the names of works and authors accumulate and it is increasingly difficult to notice and recognise what is important.

According to Maire Liivamets: ...*an Estonian writer wishes that all his or her books were in every library in Estonia, that everybody would read them and that librarians would happily welcome all the books and readers. Plus the writers. To try to make this dream come true, as I said, both writers and librarians have made an enormous effort, together with the Estonian Librarians’ Association and the National Library.*

Thanks to this cooperation, the literary tours have become part of our autumn landscape.

So far about one hundred or so writers have met their readers. They include well-known writers, and those almost unknown to the public, but whose works may be wonderful discoveries for readers. One thing is certain: young authors are always especially exciting for young readers and thus the organisers of the tours have invited along a large number of younger writers, some only just making names for themselves. Some magazines (e.g. Värske Rõhk), literary groups (e.g. Purpurmust) etc. have received enthusiastic feedback from the usually quite conservative and prejudiced librarians. Unfortunately, this is not true everywhere, but quite often the teachers of literature at local schools have seized the opportunity and involved their students. Performing for a young audience who have not turned up totally voluntarily is a huge challenge for the writers. We were once warned, for example, that half the students were going to leave (for other lessons) within the first half hour; two hours later, however, nobody had left.

It is fascinating to see how an author’s live words actually work in public. As a writer’s job is one of the most solitary, writers are not necessarily brilliant performers. At the same time, a lesser-known author might well establish better rapport with an audience in a small rural library than writers who are better known.

The questions a writer has to answer vary widely.

On the very first tour, for example, one of the most frequently tackled issues and also one filled with reproaches for new Estonian literature was the usage of obscenities in texts. The readers told us quite frankly that they were not reading modern Estonian literature because it was nothing but filthy

language. It can only be hoped that our talk, especially Jan Kaus's comprehensive overview of contemporary Estonian literature managed to at least alleviate this harsh generalisation.

The librarians complained that occasionally they had to literally dodge the books hurled back at them by furious readers and during our talk we also saw clearly that literature could evoke passionate responses. Things can thus turn violent not only in literary texts, but also in libraries, while communicating with people. Naturally we sometimes felt as if we had inadvertently wandered into a literary battlefield.

It is obvious that readers can be divided into those who read serious literature and those who read mass literature. The readers of Estonian literature divide between several genres, but it was nevertheless surprising to hear just how many readers, regardless of gender, increasingly preferred lighter entertainment. A librarian once explained: people face numerous hardships in their daily lives and so they do not really want anything else to read except fairy-tales for adults.

According to book-lending statistics, our literary tours in different places across the country have had widely differing consequences.

In Pärnu, for example, visiting writers had practically no impact on the readers' choices, whereas in the libraries on the island of Hiiumaa the books by the visiting writers were in huge demand afterwards, even causing queues to form.

The libraries generally say that there are (as yet) no major problems in lending books by Estonian authors, and that a living writer is by far the best advertisement for his or her books, because in most cases their work is borrowed more after the readers have met them. The readers apparently very much approve when an Estonian author actually recommends works by another Estonian writer. This attracts interest not only in the recommended works, but also in the work by the writer who did the recommending; a broader view of literature and literary passion do matter to our readers.

From January 2015 the state support for libraries increased and although librarians' salaries grew by 4.5 per cent, they are still lower than the salaries of people working in local governments. The population in rural areas is gradually dropping, and the situation of small libraries is hence getting worse.

We certainly cannot buy as many books as we would like and meet the demand of our readers. The financial support has indeed increased, but how much we will actually get is another matter entirely, as it depends on the size of the local population, said the head librarian in a central Estonian library.

There's clearly no shortage of problems. For example, there's the overwhelmingly worrying issue of the deceasing population and people leaving the country, which will have an impact on the future of libraries. Perhaps the main hope is that the libraries will at least have free e-books to offer.

The literary tours have another, an inner dimension. A significant plus of our joint travels across the country is that the writers really get to know one another. After all, we perform together, listen to questions and answers, and share our impressions.

Time is precious.

Estonian writers no longer spend time together in certain cafes and clubs, which used to be the regular meeting places. More often than not you see a colleague only at the annual general meeting in spring, and even then there is no time for a proper chat. On the literary tours, on long journeys through constant autumnal dusk, on the other hand, we are (especially after a successful meeting with readers) closer to one another and more open. After a tour in 2011, Piret Raud wrote to us (Andrei Hvostov, Kalju Kruusa and myself) in her sincere manner: now I love you all! This perhaps summarises the positive impact of a literary tour in our cultural field, otherwise so Nordic and a bit bleak.

Andrei Ivanov

Harbin's Moths (Harbini ööliblikad)

Tallinn: Varrak, 2013. 439 pages ISBN 9789985329016

by Brita Melts

Andrei Ivanov (1971), born and raised in Estonia, lives in Tallinn and writes in Russian. He has honestly admitted that he does not feel like an Estonian writer at all. For him, Estonia literature is foreign literature; having studied Russian language and literature, his work is certainly closer to Russian traditions, being more in dialogue with the work of Nabokov, Dostoyevsky, Tolstoi and Gogol. His symbolic homeland is Russia. His work, too, overwhelmed by the theme of alienation, digs deep into a kind of survival on the borderline of two highly different cultures, trying to overcome the boundaries of a particular national written culture. Paradoxically, descriptions of pessimistic and bleak worlds, full of desolate alienation, often encapsulated in existential anxieties and unsolvable situations, have made Ivanov one of the most significant writers in contemporary Estonian literature, both in geographical Estonia as well as in the cultural field. Trying to understand, defend and justify such a vague phenomenon, Estonian cultural circles have claimed that Ivanov's work is an example of literature which elsewhere is called transnational. This has dispelled the need for a discussion on the topic of Estonian-Russian literature, which used to focus partly on Ivanov. (Incidentally, in *Harbin's Moths* there is a line that connects with this discussion: "Exile literature – it is merely a description of a parasite's life, that's all!" When a Russian exile in Estonia writes a novel, where is its place, in which literature, and for whom is he writing?)

Harbin's Moths is the fourth book by Ivanov published in Estonian. His collection of short stories *My Danish Uncle. Ashes* (2010) reflects, amongst other things, the author's long experience of living in Scandinavia. Scandinavia is also the place where the action is set in *Hanuman's Journey to Lolland* (published in Estonian in 2012), a novel that became hugely popular, made it onto the short-list of the Russian Booker and received an award from the Estonian Cultural Endowment. The Russian-language manuscript of another novel, *A Handful of Dust* (2011), was translated into Estonian. It is set in Estonia, as is *Harbin's Moths*. The sequel to *Hanuman's Journey...,* the novel *Bizarre,* published in late 2014 in Estonian, is set in Denmark; Ivanov has called these two novels parts of a Scandinavian trilogy (so we can expect a third Danish novel). Ivanov tackles the issues of emigration and being an outsider on several levels, as the Scandinavian novels reflect the fragile and uncertain existence of Russian illegal emigrants, whose only logical option is to escape from refugee camps: homeless Russians here and there, their simultaneously frustrating and blazing perceptions of life make up the nucleus and markers of Ivanov's work.

Andrei Ivanov (Photo by Peeter Langovits / Scanpix)

Ivanov has mainly depicted recent history or contemporary society, whereas *Harbin's Moths* can be seen as a true historical novel: it very realistically depicts the life of Russian emigrants in Tallinn in the 1920s and 1930s. The characters must adapt to a strange country and alien circumstances, and their suffering, anxieties and temperamental disharmonies are revealed. The focus is on twenty years in the life of the artist Boriss Rebrov: he left Russia as a young man together with the White Russian army of Nikolai Yudenich during the Russian civil war (1918-20). On his way to Tallinn/Revel he lost his family, and is now trying to find his way in an alien country, working in a photographic studio and painting, and ends up in the Russian fascist party. His everyday reality is mainly filled with the anxiety of living in an alien place, bleakness, misery, poverty, hunger and fragile self-perception. The novel begins with a provocative incident concerning the issue

of an artist's ability to work: upon receiving a commission, how thoroughly and slowly or how quickly and superficially can the artist work? This creative framework introduces the novel's main existential issue: the theme of adapting to circumstances. Whoever has acquired a separate "habit of Revel *resp* Tallinn" manages the social norms better, while others simply know that "happiness is inseparably linked with one's homeland", and being rootless determines the artist's success and failures in life, because life on your "home territory – only this makes a person happy; this is the foundation on which the whole life arrangement happens; harmonious existence is guaranteed by nature itself, in the midst of which the ancestors have lived for a thousand years, sowing..."

The novel is set in Estonia, and the "Estonia-topic" is the inevitable background, with which the characters fail to associate either culturally or by identity; the emigrants have found a temporary refuge, but it is uncertain and short-lived, without any clear aims. Indeed, it is just as fragile and short-lived as the young Republic of Estonia! For the Russian characters in *Harbin's Moths,* life is empty and useless, because "There is no *Russian life* in it, no mixture which constitutes our main idea, our essence." When the protagonist says to himself in Estonian "Artist *Boriss Rebrov"*, it reflects nothing great or existential, and uttering this title in the official language conveys nothing but silence and emptiness. Perceiving the distance from the country of origin evokes a decadent atmosphere, mental rot and destruction; the emigrants remain life's outcasts, vague simpletons, because they lack fixed social status, peace and the daily routine a person needs; an alien and unfamiliar country is all around them, disharmony... The characters know that "people aren't bored in Russia", and being extravagant is obvious there, whereas in emigration this can be compensated for only by wandering from one brothel to another and using drugs, although this seems a path to degeneration, so that the downfall grips not only the body, but the entire soul as well. Depraved provincial existence alternates with soft "magic moments", which in turn are penetrated by the flow of consciousness struggling in suppressed anxieties, Boriss's dream-labyrinths and startling awakenings. Leaps in time, in place, in concreteness and illusoriness, added to exuberant images, poetically decorous and yet perpetuating an alien, sceptical mentality – it all grips and drags the reader into an artistic tailspin until saturation is achieved.

Despite the frustration and pessimism, Ivanov does not end his novel on a bleak note. The finale of *Harbin's Moths* is the redeeming re-playing of identity. In political chaos, Boriss, who "did not live during all these years", but *pretended*, has to adopt a dead man's name and citizenship so he can escape across the sea to Sweden with a passport proving his alien nationality. This form of escape – from exile to exile! – summarises the paradoxes of national issues and the misfortunes of destiny. Boriss' long-lasting anxiety ends, as does the novel, with the sentence: "Wherever he looked there were little sun rabbits, bobbing on the waves like moths." ... Still, those moths! Another Estonian-Russian writer, Andrei Hvostov, noted that the Harbin in the title is the biggest town in Manchuria, which in the inter-war period became the largest centre of Russian emigration besides Paris and Berlin. The character Boriss Rebrov receives a parcel from that city, and from it emerge strange moth-like winged creatures. With the final sentence of the novel, the meaningful motif has moved from one exile to another. This is no doubt great literature and at the same time historical narrative, which to counterbalance stories written by Estonian exiles in the West offers a fragment of a totally different sense of exile, another view of Estonia.

Short outlines of books by Estonian

by Brita Melts,

Livia Viitol
Jutte ja novelle
(Tales and Short Stories)
Tallinn: Libri Livoniae, 2014. 135 pp
ISBN 9789949336159

Tales and Short Stories clearly stands among the best of Estonian short prose of last year. The book contains 13 brilliant stories written between 1993 and 2013. This is the first collection of stories of Livia Viitol (b. 1953), a poet, freelance translator and literary historian. She earlier published three collections of poetry and a literary historical monograph on Eduard Vilde (1865-1933), a master of prose and one of the pioneers of critical realism in Estonian literature, which earned her the Eduard Vilde Literary Award. She has also translated the poetry of the Latvian authors Juris Kronbergs, Aleksandrs Čaks and Valts Ernštreits into Estonian.

Only a few of her stories are set in the urban milieu and, even then, they mostly focus on the characters' shut-off inner imaginative world. Her characters are people of high intellectual level but of low social skills, devoted to some field of art (e.g. writing or painting). The stories search for answers to the question of the possibility of human solitude in an environment swarming with curious and nosy neighbours in a large residential block, and deal with the creative person's need for solitude and a private mental space. In references to death, Viitol also shows us the vital paradox of how lonely a person can be among hundreds and hundreds of neighbours.

Mostly, her stories move in some rural environment, in some undefined and mysterious forest, or in some restricted and guarded border zone in Soviet Estonia. Only one of the 13 stories of the book reaches out of Estonia to Latvia. In these different environments the characters meet with odd and unusual situations that form the background for different impressive sensual experiences, problems, existential barriers or for slightly irrational short trips away from the daily routine. Descriptions of these nodal points also reflect the characters' sensitive perception of the earth: human angst drives them to question the haunting secrets hidden in ground that has witnessed inhuman historical events. "Why had the ground not filled in and grown over these [holes that testified about the human tragedy], but kept them like smallpox scars on a person's face? Had the time that had passed been too short, or had the ground been too weak?"

authors

Rutt Hinrikus and Janika Kronberg

A short walk in the forest can evoke the realisation of the fragility of existence: “Never before had they thought that even the earth can be fragile and vulnerable”, as well as reveal a mysterious and magical pull and movement where people do not find the path, but the path recognises and leads them.

Such situations embody balancing on borders and crossing them in both the spatial and temporal sense. Border zones and transitional times, in the political sense (the collapse of the Soviet regime and Estonia’s regaining of independence and the accompanying changes in life in general), on the direct light-darkness axis or even in the present-day unpredictable merging of different reflections of the past (traces of the past that can be sensed in familiar landscapes, having an effect on the present) add a special tonality to the stories. Such a depiction of space-time makes some things clearer and other things more indistinct, creating situations where the windows let in “a strange light that made the visible invisible and the invisible visible and brought with it hundred-year-old images, as if time had become transparent like glass.”

Viitol inserts a kind of irregularity into the regular lives of her characters, making them feel some vague excitement and uneasy uncertainty. For example, the angst of a creative intellectual culminates in the arrival of a foreign “lady from a public maintenance society”, who sees the everyday life of the local transition period and entirely normal routine practices as misery and stagnation. Odd and bizarre situations (such as moments when the characters wander about in the woods and stray into Latvia, or an uncomfortable supper in an old manor house) quite justifiably evoke a comparison with Fellini’s films; however, the strange social milieu of Viitol’s stories maintains a balance between human warmth, wise empathy and desolate angst. BM

Livia Viitol (Photo by Peeter Langovits / Scanpix)

Jüri Talvet

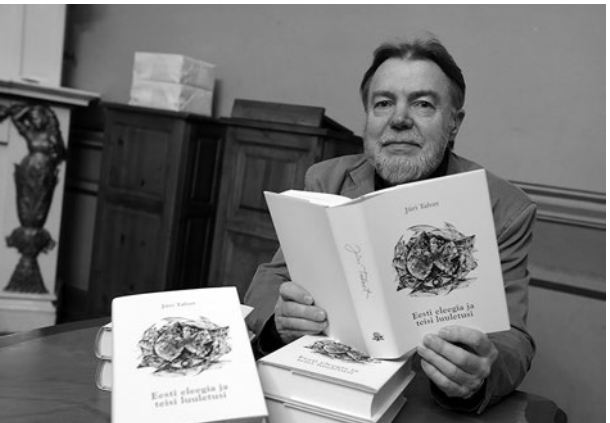
Ten Letters to Montaigne. “Self” and “other”

Tartu: Tartu Ülikooli Kirjastus, 2014. pp. 175
ISBN 9789949326525

This book of essays by the professor of world literature, translator and poet Jüri Talvet (b. 1945) contains ten letters to the founder of the essay genre, Michel de Montaigne, who, according to Talvet, is one of “the greatest philosophers of the West”, and in whom he has discovered a “European thinker whose ideas are close and important to me because I perceive in them support for my own intellectual output.” The ten letters are interspersed with eight “interim readings”, introducing key works in world literature which have been previously published (e.g. Defoe, Cervantes, Flaubert and Virginia Woolf).

This is also an attempt to preserve the genre of professional essays as a rare field of art which is not much cultivated today. The discussions addressing Montaigne were initially written in English, although not yet published, and these clearly relate to the era of their addressee. Thus the ten letters can be seen as compact conspectuses of world literature lectures, selections from unusual emphases on cultural history and quick overviews of all essential social, cultural and technical processes after Montaigne. Talvet also weaves intimate beliefs and opinions into broad themes, and hence quite a few paragraphs reveal persistent, and well-grounded criticism of globalisation, consumer culture, technical revolution, straightforward rationality and brutal materialism. To all this, the author opposes free and creative reflection, deepest human consciousness, sensitive philosophy and the humanities in their classical sense.

Jüri Talvet (Photo by Margus Ansu / Scanpix)



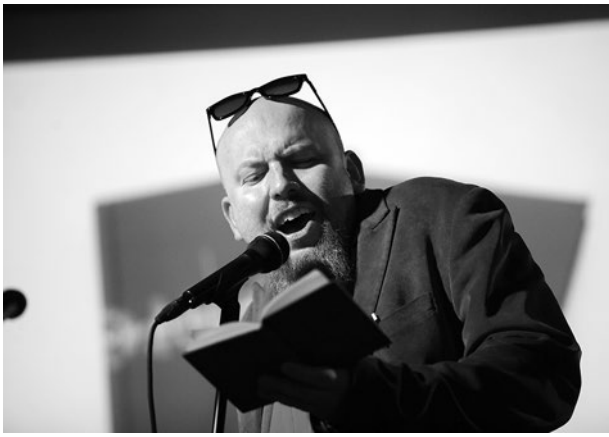
The relations between “self” and “other”, the subtitle of the text, refer to topics that have often got stuck in the opposition of “centre” and “periphery”. The binary nature of periphery and centre includes cultural codes, social norms, artistic tendencies, national and linguistic peculiarities, as well as specifically geographical places where both sides of the binary should be known. It is not enough to know only the “other”, argues Talvet; it must be known and properly perceived, because without knowing the other we cannot really know ourselves.

The philosophical thoughts and discussions on the history of culture squeezed into the ten letters are imbued with the atmosphere of the island of Rhodes, where the bulk of the book was written. Among other things, the environment encourages especially close-to-nature observations: weather conditions can directly encourage a flow of thought, for example in Greece, the cradle of philosophy, where the weather is warm all through the year, or thwart creative activities: “Nobody can long think fruitfully in a room where the temperature is near or below zero.” The island of Rhodes is firmly rooted in Estonian literature in the work of Karl Ristikivi, although Talvet’s book does not deal with Ristikivi. The author clearly displays his singular ability, already familiar from his earlier works, to find unexpected connections between writers at home and abroad. “Ten Letters” seeks proximity to Montaigne’s ideas in the work of different writers. From the nation and globally, “self” and “other” intertwined in his reflections, Talvet returns, in various convoluted ways, to domestic stem texts and his favourites, for example the poet Juhan Liiv and the Estonian epic *Kalevipoeg*, linking their national-cultural meaning with symbiotic culture or transnational culture. BM.

Jürgen Rooste

Suur sume, suur tume (Poetry)

Tallinn: Verb, 2014. 80 pp
ISBN 9789949947355



Jürgen Rooste (Photo by Dmitri Kotjuh / Scanpix)

Jürgen Rooste's collection of poetry earned a great deal of notice and renown last year, as it differs strongly from the earlier work of the author, who has so far been known as an urban poet and blues man. Rooste (born 1979) is currently one of the most prolific Estonian poets: during his 15-year-long career in poetry, he has published more than a dozen collections (considering his creative potential and stylish eagerness, among younger Estonian poets only Kaur Riismaa might be able to surpass him soon). Being his first collection of love poetry, it comes as a surprise. Rooste's poetic self has always roamed city streets and partied as a flaneur, sketching pictures of different moods at different back corners and situations in Tallinn, finding ways to express irony and intuition, as well as conveying wider ideas with a social-critical sub-tone. Above all, he has mastered expressive free verse that often contains intertextual and playful intertwinings with works of Estonian literary classics or with works of contemporary poets from his own circle.

Entirely new keywords stand out in this new collection. The author moves from the urban rumpus to the landscapes of a small fishing village. Together with his children, his poetic self explores the summer outdoors, playful rains and insects: "The monotone humming of insects, the faraway sound of a motorboat,/ even a sawmill: in this summer everything reminds me of/ a prayer, I am in a continuous dusky meditation." In such an environment and with descriptions of prayer and meditation, the poetic self starts to perceive his existence as a "Buddhist asceticism", which means coping with everyday life, being together with his children, being away from the busy city life and discovering the self in all this ("will I ever get out of this thicket/ will I come to life again and return home/ could this journey cleanse my heart that is dark?"). One thing is clear from the beginning: it is love that is important, whether already in full force or only gathering strength; at one moment it becomes the core of the book and gives the poetic self a new reason for breathing and brings passionate changes to his life. "… but how can you write poems/ if you are not in love/ or, rather, you are in love with all this/ the green of the foliage is infectious/ you are green in your soul/ a new freshly crawled-out small worm."

At first, Rooste seems "like he has lost his way in space and time"; through small beings and everyday things he examines and learns about the environment (and writes haikus about it!). This is the starting point of the "echo and sound of the story of life", until his everyday existence in a fishing village called Käsmu collides with a clear passionate love directed towards the one and only, first a vaguely abstract ideal woman, then the clearly defined young woman Sveta. From this moment on, Rooste strives for the depths of love, he wants to live in a way that he can give to his lover something more than "only the stifling sweetness of hung-over mornings"; he "would like to believe in endless love". At the end of the book, the poetic self returns to the already familiar city

milieu, starts to cruise bars and his poems depart from the form of haiku that was often used in the beginning of the book and channel into his familiar, intense and private city blues. He has to come to terms with his inner sense of morals and make decisive choices ("I evoke the picture of my home/ I feel as if my heart is racing// I need to exist somewhere else/ for my children as well"). However, in all this the special mood of summer vacation remains, some freshness and unexpectedness, the beauty of the world in the form of a new love: "I did not write a poem about/ how I almost believe after a long time/ that this kind of love is possible/ that you think about a person and hold her/ in your thoughts and roll her like a snowball/ of the first snow that does not melt/ that you cannot bear to throw away/ because there is the beauty of the beginning and the world in it/ the real feeling/ that you still remember having seen/ in life and in things." BM

Märten Kross
Hullumäng
(The Insanity Game)
Tammerraamat. Tallinn. 2014. 207 pp
ISBN: 9789949526383

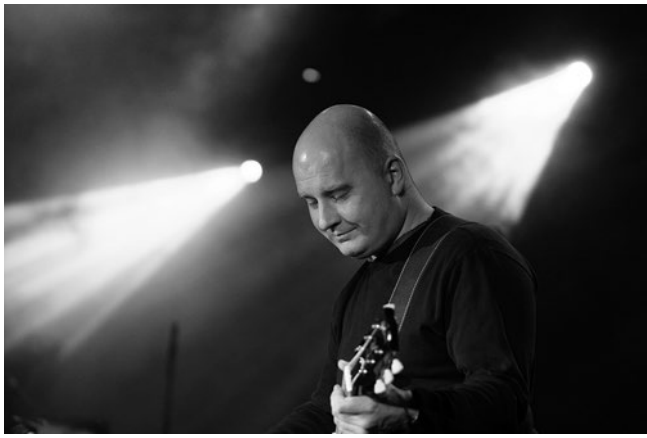
The Insanity Game is Kross's first novel. First novels are quite often written about the author's own experiences, but they may also be built upon somebody else's story, and the author may empathise as much as if it were his own life, seen through his own eyes. Among Estonian literary classics, Karl Ristikivi's début novel *Fire and Iron* was of this kind: the young author formed his book by listening to the stories told by his landlord. It is naturally easier to use one's own experiences than to draw on those of others, but still it is the result – the work – that is important, not the source.

When reading Märten Kross's (b. 1970) novel, we cannot stop wondering about the biographical background of this book, whether it is about the author's own life or about other people's lives, whether it is the truth or exaggeration. But what's important is whether people can relate to the story that the book tells.

The Insanity Game is about mandatory service in the Soviet Army. The military service was two to three years long and many young people did not want to lose these years of their youth. Moreover, military service became more and more dangerous over the years.

Lack of order in the army constantly increased and the phenomenon called "dedovshstsina" became steadily more prominent. This was the rule of the "older years" over fresh recruits, unrestricted violence towards newcomers in order to break the monotony. There were neither ideals nor ideas, life was boring and older soldiers played brutal and humiliating games that caused numerous suicides among new recruits. There was one classical way of avoiding military service: to get a medical certificate saying that its owner was unfit for military service. The protagonist of the novel, Hendrik, has decided to pretend to be a mentally unstable person and for three years this has helped him to avoid being conscripted. But as he has not been given a

Märten Kross (Photo by Arno Saar / Scanpix)



final release from duty, he has to act out his insanity each year. The novel focuses on one period of his insanity game. We get detailed descriptions of his visits to the enlistment office and health checks; numerous details show an atmosphere full of absurdity and fear, which forces people to play a kind of a cat-and-mouse game. Military authorities are suspicious of the local physicians who conducted the health check-ups, and Hendrik is sent to Riga to be checked by Riga military physicians. The inner climate of the Riga military hospital is truly Kafkaesque, but it is 1988 and new winds have begun to blow. At the end of the novel, the protagonist goes to see the Baltic Chain of Freedom. Mentioning several real-life figures from history, such as Prof. Saarma, raises the documentary credibility of the book.

Hendrik is lucky, nothing drastic happens to him, and all he can do is wait for a decision: if his diagnosis is overturned, he will have to go to the army. His fate may be similar to that of a young man who has been brought to the same hospital where he is staying. The lad was derided, beaten and finally struck with a spade so that he has a fractured skull. He was the only Estonian serving among men from southern Soviet republics. This was the only reason why he was made a scapegoat and he was saved only because his father brought him back home.

This book can be called a testimonial novel. It cannot be called confessional, because the protagonist is not open to the world: he is too neutrally impersonal, but gives his testimony in a dutiful and efficient way. Quite a lot of characteristic and frightening memoirs have recently been collected about military duty during the Soviet period and about its army of ill-educated soldiers. Against such a background, *The Insanity Game* serves as a testimony of the era. As a novel, its scope is quite narrow: Hendrik is either in a mental hospital or at a military base. Hendrik's wife Anne is barely mentioned. The book is clearly and logically composed and the dialogues feel natural. We can be sure that Märten Kross, who comes from the literary family of Jaan Kross and Ellen Niit, will give us more good novels in the future. RH

Jan Kaus

Ma olen elus

(I Am Alive)
Tallinn: Tuum, 2014. 280 pp
ISBN 978-9949-9482-9-1

I Am Alive, the fifth novel of the versatile writer and culture critic Jan Kaus, attracted the attention of critics and the media right after its appearance. It is written in clear and precise language, and its interesting subject matter is related to recent Estonian history: the reader cannot remain indifferent. However, the novel does not offer easy reading. There are many characters, and their different stories, interrelations and meanings all take some time to puzzle out.

Although the setting is fictive, Estonian readers can easily recognise it as the north-western area of continental Estonia, where the railway, built in 1906, led to the spa town of Haapsalu, which was visited by the Russian Emperor Nicholas II. Kaus has moved the railway terminus to a more isolated spot, and the main plot lines about the three generations of one family proceed from the secluded railway terminal on the seashore. This place is called Tarurootsi, combining the Estonian word for beehive – taru – with the word for Sweden – rootsi – thus referring to the Swedes who historically inhabited this area. The most notable area of work of the people of Tarurootsi is bee-keeping and they send carriages full of honey to the Moscow political elite.

The main gallery of characters from the pre-WWII time to the recent past includes the disappointed-in-life stationmaster, who now and then becomes violent, his wife and her affair with the local good-natured bee-keeper,

the stationmaster's two sons Georg and Harald and their offspring. It is interesting that among so many personal stories of different people it is the stationmaster, hardly ever showing any likeable traits, who becomes the central character of the book. One of his frequent drinking and sauna buddies is the NKVD officer Pereshkov, and we are led to believe that he is participating in interrogations; the violence and bitterness that he has accumulated live on in his son. Coping with the spiritual traumas caused by the past and the origin of his characters is without doubt the most important aspect of the psychological and realistic plane of Kaus's novel. Perhaps the author has to some extent been influenced by Sofi Oksanen's novels, which he has translated into Estonian.

However, the realism of Kaus's novel is mixed with local lore, mythology and to some extent even elements of fantasy. In the local lore, there lives on an illegitimate child from older times, a "cat-woman", whose strange voice can now and then be heard in the woods and who has her own role in the book. The novel opens with the somewhat mysterious activities of an international mega-corporation, whose interest in buying a seashore land plot results in the arrival of the fantasy-like character Arnold Huitberg, who has several birth dates and who cannot, due to some mutation, grow old. It is said that he suffers from the illness of life. He stays at the railway terminal, hiding from the corporation and, in the end, bequeaths the lands that he has bought to the stationmaster's son Georg. A Christian political party and an organisation with the pretentious name Vox Populi meddle in local affairs and their activities; this meddling, together with the corporation growing genetically modified plants and mining shale oil, brings about an ecological catastrophe. Thus the book also tells us about national values and nature conservation, about the natural environment of the people and the country, but these issues are not presented in an exaggerated or pathetic manner. The most masterful aspect of Kaus's book is his skill in credibly and realistically drawing together the dynamic fates of different people and using different magical, fantastic and realistic registers in his book. JK

Jan Kaus (Photo by Toomas Kokovkin / Scanpix)

Maarja Kangro

Hüppa tulle

(Jump into Fire)
Tallinn: Nähtamatu Ahv, 2014. 163 pp
ISBN: 9789949381098

Maarja Kangro (b. 1973) is one of the most important authors of the middle generation of Estonian writers. She has translated from English and Italian, published five collections of poetry and two collections of prose, and received several annual literary awards for her works. Her books have been admired, but also misunderstood and even belittled; she has been called cynical and cruel. This collection, *Jump into Fire*, containing three short and one longer story, is her third collection of prose. At the presentation of the book, somebody said that now she had only the genre of novel left to work on, and she answered that she had entertained the idea

of writing longer prose, but could not make any promises.

Kangro is a modern author and a cosmopolite through and through. Her characters are not necessarily tied to the Estonian environment and the locations of her plots are never precisely specified. However, she does focus on location more than on particular time periods, or she may with a few lapidary phrases refer to both : “This was a bright clear tough world of women”, she writes in the story “The Tough World of Women”. Here, the *locus* could well be Estonia, but as a spiritual environment, the tough world of women can be located anywhere, provided that there are people who can witness and record it.

The women of the book can also be called tough, especially in the first stories, where they need to cope with suppressed angst and a world dominated by power and sex. One can dream about revenge, but one can also make it happen. In the story “Dear Hammer”, the main female hero takes revenge on men in general, symbolically punishing one low-brow individual who has accidentally happened to cross her path. The hero says about herself, “She was an object of herself, doing the things that she had ordered herself to do. And it was somehow calming and soothing to imagine that she was in a strange land and was an *artificial person* at that.” The characters of Kangro’s stories strike poses and perform for an imaginary audience. They take pains to come across as independent subjects but they do not have any message. They are fearless but their fearlessness is full of despair.

Kangro’s stories contain lots of dialogue; women speak the same language as men, using plenty of obscene words and phrases that used to be avoided in written works. It feels like she has masterfully cut some accidental slice out of everyday life. However, nothing is accidental. An attentive reader finds a moral in each story. “It is the story that gives pain,” says the author. Or in other words, the story is life, and it gives life to characters. We can find still another truth in Kangro’s book: “Everything that is based on an unequal foundation is vulgar and without style.” And we cannot accuse Maarja Kangro of a lack of style, however natural the means she uses to give life to her characters. RH

Maarja Kangro (Photo by Scanpix)

Andrus Kasemaa

Minu viimane raamat

(My Last Book)
Tallinn: Varrak, 2014. 164 pp
ISBN: 9789985331361

With his second novel, Andrus Kasemaa (b. 1984) has moved to a new environment. His earlier works, three collections of

poetry (*Poeedirahu* 2008, *Lagunemine* 2009 and *Kustutamatud õhtud* (2012)) and a novel (*Leskede kadunud maailm* 2012) were all mainly located in a literary world called Poeedirahu, deep inside continental Estonia, where the sea was only a part of unreachable dreams. In *Minu viimane raamat*, readers meet the first-person narrator Andreas, who has withdrawn to a seaside retreat called the Island of Loneliness, escaping from the angst of the past, from the "heavy burden of memories and hard childhood". He escapes to find peace and forgetfulness at the seaside, to dream about new life and love, and to tell his story. The first person narrator of the book is the "boy from the inland", familiar from Kasemaa's earlier works. From the inland, he makes plans: "in summer, I shall pick up and go, jolt in a bus those 300 kilometres to reach the sea."

These old dreams are realised and the text of the story makes use of several different layers. At first, the movement to the sea triggers some bright romantic feelings about "bottle mail". The rumours that a bottle containing a letter was found on the beach, "written by 23-year-old Sigrid from Sweden", give rise to a surge of imagination that borders on an idée fixe. The first-person narrator expresses dreams about what his life would look like if the imaginary author of the bottle letter, Sigrid, came to his island; this idea is one of the key points of the narrative, a hideout for emotions and a dangerous obsession. The function of this what-if narrative is to support his clearly fictional, hollow and lying idyll at a safe seaside retreat. Somewhere in the middle of the book, Andreas expresses his quiet dream: "I want to have a family, Sigrid. I want to have somebody in my life." By that time he has already told, as a truth, a full-blown imaginary family saga.

Another aspect of the book reveals to us Kasemaa's familiar handwriting from his previous works. Namely, we can again see his sort of object-fetishism, expressed in his obsession with things washed to the shore by the sea. He presents huge lists of things originating from shipwrecks and other washed-up things, and these lists give birth to imaginary stories about unsolved mysteries of naval history, and to new imaginary stories and new flights into the world of fiction and dreams.

The second half of the book differs greatly from its beginning. In order to escape the angst of the past, Kasemaa cancels all the idyllic dreams and imaginations created in the first half of the book. His fascination with the sea is reduced to a flimsy background for the narrator's confession about his childhood being filled with sadness, poverty, humiliations, loneliness and bullying at school. Beginning from the midpoint of the book, Kasemaa starts to settle up with his (hero's) past and returns to his familiar environment, now and then changing its image since the temporal distance has changed his views of these memory landscapes. Instead of the earlier idyll, the scene is dominated by a bleak Eastern European landscape and a fatal Eastern European nightmare, "We shall forever remain Eastern Europeans. We die as Eastern Europeans. We shall be buried here in this inferior clayey earth. This is a dream world. Here. And our gravestones will read 'Eastern Europe'. Only for the strong. [---] I shall die as an Eastern European. I shall be buried as one."

Kasemaa deliberately unsettles and confuses his readers. First, he intentionally mints naïve imaginary stories-inside-the-novel about the bottle letter and sea romanticism, using fantasy to avoid the realistic sadness and angst; he takes his readers into idyllic and blissful dreams. This is preparation for a change in tonality and the undermining of the dreams starting at the midpoint of the book, and a giving way to inconsolable sadness and loneliness. However, *My Last Book* ends with sentences about the creative and liberating power of the sea, about the sea as the treasure chest of the mental world and as an endless colourful dream. BM

Katri Raik

Minu Narva

(My Narva)

Tartu, Petroneprint 2013 254 pp
ISBN: 9789949511471

The Petroneprint publishing house, created by the Petrone family, has launched a book series called *Minu …* (*My …*), and have already published 132 books about living in various countries: *My Finland*, *My Denmark*, *My Singapore*, *My Brazil* etc. etc. This series has proved to be unexpectedly popular. Its circle of authors is very wide and, as these books are usually their first works, the quality of the books, understandably, varies. The books of the series show the variety of the world seen through Estonians' eyes. Hemingway said that at least one Estonian can be found in every port of the world and now these people have been made to talk about their lives. Some books in the series are about Estonia as well; Justin Petrone's *My Estonia* is very popular.

Katri Raik (b. 1967) is the author of *Minu Narva*. Narva is an old Estonian border town on the road from Tallinn to St. Petersburg, quite near the shore of the Gulf of Finland. In 1944, almost the whole town was destroyed and the town that was rebuilt after the war bears very little resemblance to the beautiful old Baroque town of Narva. Due to extensive industrial development (the Kreenholm spinning plants), there was a need for labour and the town was repopulated with mainly Russian people. The Estonians felt lost in and alienated from this new Narva and started to move elsewhere in Estonia. People usually did not dream about getting a job in Narva. If somebody writes about Narva, the focus is usually on the relations between Estonians and Russians and the possibilities of integration.

In 1999, the University of Tartu decided to open a college in Narva. Katri Raik from Tartu applied for the position of college director. Since then she has been living and working in Narva, having left only for a few years when she was writing her doctoral dissertation. She begins her book about the town of Narva by talking about the people of Narva, their habits and mentality, about whether Narva is a beautiful town, and whether Narva, which is the drug capital of the area, is a dangerous town. Before the war, Narva was considered to be one of the most beautiful towns in Estonia. The post-war Narva could well be an illustration for a textbook on Soviet architecture in the years 1944-1990. The book is fascinating not because it is about the town, but because it is about the inhabitants of the town. In regard to women of the town, it says that they are beautiful and proud to show it; about children, the chapter boldly closes with the words "Believe me, they are the future

Katri Raik (Photo by Aldo Luud / Scanpix)

high-ranking state officials. If only they do not move to England."

In 1999, when Katri Raik started her work in Narva, about one-third of the inhabitants were Estonian citizens, about the same number were Russian citizens and one-third were people without citizenship. Now about 44% of the inhabitants are Estonian citizens. The two communities of very different cultural traditions are very little integrated. Russians in Narva do not feel strongly that they are citizens of Estonia, and they get most of their information from across the border, from Russia. To get Estonian citizenship, it is necessary to pass an examination which people believe to be too difficult.

Katri Raik writes about the local customs that she has adopted, how she has started to love glamourous appearance, and about many other local features. Quite a number of books have recently been published about the relations between Estonians and Russians in Estonia, Andrei Hostov's autobiographical *Sillamäe passioon* (*The Passion of Sillamäe*) being the most notable. Katri Raik's *Minu Narva* has a much warmer atmosphere and it is also less deep, perhaps because the roots of the author are somewhere else. But *Minu Narva* can be enjoyed for its author's sincere curiosity, empathy, humour and even some hints of self-irony. RH

Doris Kareva (Photo by Peeter Langovits / Scanpix)

Doris Kareva

Maailma asemel

(Instead of the World)
[Tallinn], Verb 2014. 80 pp
ISBN: 9789949947386

Doris Kareva's book *Maailma Asemel* was published in 2014. But readers may have forgotten that Doris Kareva (b. 1958), the author of fourteen collections of poetry, published a book under the same title with another publisher and with a different design in 1992. Now this is the second print. Collections of poetry are very rarely reissued after 22 years. A new run is printed either at once or never, and the best poems will again be published in collections of selected poems. It will be interesting to see what effect this book has on readers today. Kareva, much loved by her readers, is the youngest of the great Estonian women poets, who tell us about love and eternity. Many younger women poets have emerged, but none of them has so far gained a comparable reception and renown.

Maailma asemel was first published when the newly restored Estonian Republic was still very young and, perhaps, even a surprise for many. Kareva addressed her poetry to the people of that special period, but do her poems also say something to the people of the present day?

The poems are divided into five cycles, containing both current and eternal subjects. The opening poem “I Dreamt about the World” begins with a wish: “Oh, the world, be greater!” The next cycle is characterised by the line “My brother, you were left behind the gate”. In the next poem, the author says, “I sing to praise the loser, because the winner is praised anyway”. The next cycle shows that sympathetic verses are meant to tell about individuals in certain complicated situations, not about the general sorrow of those pushed aside by society.

Kareva’s poetry is like the abundant midsummer blooming of all kinds of flowers, full of passion and nobility, ecstasy and the sweet pain of resignation and departure: everything that has so often been written about from classical antiquity through Shakespeare’s sonnets up to the present day. This is the heritage of poetry, one of its faces which is often hidden behind veils. Kareva is a master and her poetry is passionate, but still controlled and always in the best taste.

Kareva, both a priestess and a slave of love, mostly dreams about “You” in these restless and changing times. She knows that there is the “foamy summer of life: as deep as it is high, golden, light, frightening, bubbly and boiling”. She tells herself “My heart, stay clear!”. She states “The world, a pleasure and suffering”, adding to this, “The world as an idea”, and she believes that “messages and hidden relations can be found in the cypher of the ring.”

The world of Kareva’s poetry turns around “You”, but tries to get rid of this dependence, because “The world is a fairy tale, a surprising memory, a story, a legend: the world has all the time passed us.” But, “All through time, each moment is a new beginning.” She does not want to break absolutely free, but wishes to find some clarification.

Her poetry does not belong to a certain moment of history, to the end of one and the beginning of another era; it is an extratemporal confession and message. RH

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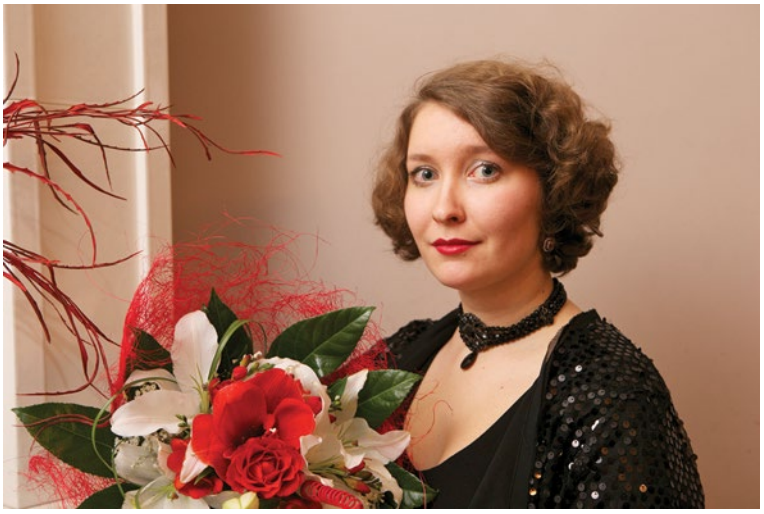

Eda Ahi (Photo by Aldo Luud / Scanpix)