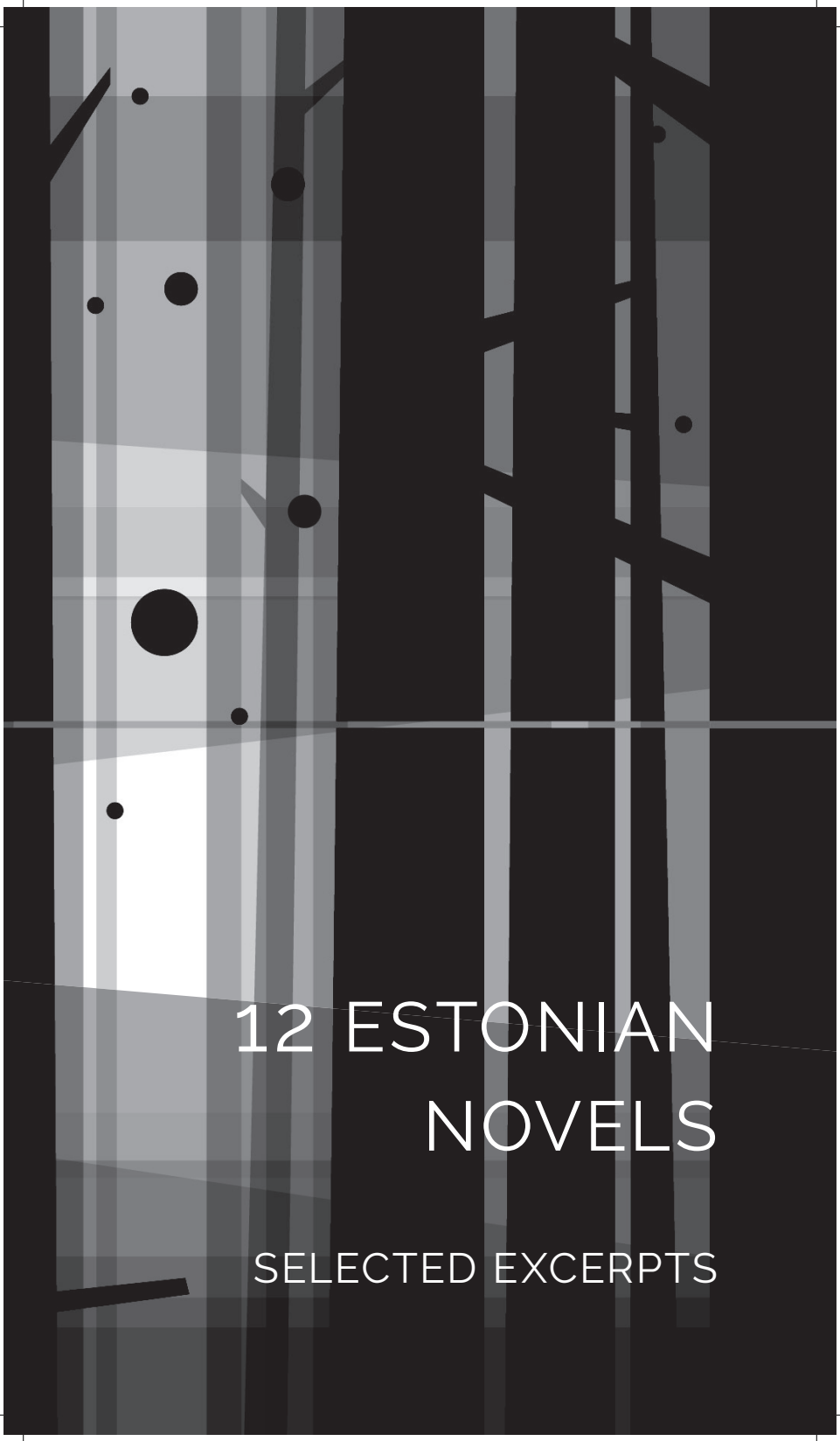






12 ESTONIAN NOVELS

SELECTED EXCERPTS

Compiled and edited by the Estonian Literature Centre

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12 ESTONIAN NOVELS

SELECTED EXCERPTS

Estonian Literature elic Centre



This Excerpt Book has been compiled by the Estonian Literature Centre (ELIC) as a promotional material. Here, you will find a sampling of twelve prize-winning contemporary Estonian novels, with each extract translated from Estonian into English. The book aims to familiarize readers with works that have not yet been published in English.

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More information about Estonian books and authors can be found on the Estonian Literature Centre's webpage at **www.estlit.ee**

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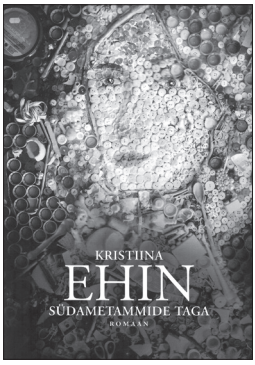
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PARADISE



KRISTIINA EHIN
(1977)

BEHIND THE DAMS OF THE HEART

An imaginative description of the beautifully messy family life of an artistic couple. This novel is a humorous textbook for loving and existence in gripping literary form. A book about a woman's thousand roles and how easy it seems to be and to achieve celebrity as a man.



Kristiina Ehin
SÜDAMETAMMIDE TAGA
Loomepuhkus 2024, 256 p.

OVERTURE

I wake. I don't dare open my eyes yet. Blessed silence, a delicate sense of being, teetering on the edge of the world. Where am I? Who am I? I step tentatively through the mist on what seems like a mossy path.

Then all my selves start coming to mind one by one. I know that the eternal struggle for existence between roles will start again any moment now.

Here they come: powerful women, their backs bent under responsibilities borne on their shoulders for thousands of years. They appear before me, try to straighten their backs, and let me know that I am at their mercy.

It's supposed to be an honour for me to wake up into a world ordered by them, where Married Woman, Hera's favourite, sits on the throne. She knows that she is the zenith of young women's expectations and dreams, and that even I have had to make an effort to arrive in her circle of glory. Certainly a gold ring makes you a member of that honourable band of women who have found the loves of their lives.

Married Woman knows how to get my attention and manages in a single moment to swaddle me in a spider's web of everyday responsibilities. Behind her lurks her faithful shadow Desperate Housewife. Serving the two of them I could bury my whole life between the walls of my home. But I remember that being born into this world is a conjunction of coincidences as great as a *näkk*[*] rising to the surface of a bog lake for air once every thousand years and by chance poking her nipple through a ring fallen into the water at that very moment.

Just then Married Woman gives a black eye to one of my dearest companions, Nipernaadi[**] Woman. Married Woman looks with contempt on my dream to set out on the road at the beginning of summer, to wander from village to village and town to town, and on the way to fall blindly in love and break hearts.

'What's all this twaddle about?' she growls.

'Purely egoistic considerations, and to make life a bit wilder' answers the Nipernaadi Woman inside me. I feel her lean body sink into the rushes from the sudden thump Married Woman has given her. It seems that on this March morning I have to once again leave this bold adventurer to recover in my heart's undergrowth.

I peer through my eyelashes — the day is sunny. Birds are chirping outside my window. But the battlefield in my soul is spreading out.

---

* näkk: in Estonian folklore, a water spirit in the form of a young woman.

** Nipernaadi: a reference to the main character, a vagabond, in August Gailits's novel *Toomas Nipernaadi* (1928).

Wearing a long velvet dress, Mother of the Year, having raised at least two fine children, steps proudly into my field of vision smiling at a grand room full of people. The shadowy figure accompanying her, trotting along on her tail, is familiar to me too - the Children's Sadistic School-Schlepper, who, in the name of progressive development, forces dreary athletics training on the children, along with music school that kills all sense of play. The look from these embodiments of motherhood is threatening: those who strive for perfection must make sacrifices!

Mother of the Year commands a piercing stepmother gaze. She twists the arms of the Hedonist in me behind my back for wanting to watch films with my children today and order a pizza to my bed. 'Children must learn to pull themselves together in order to make something of themselves' says Mother of the Year, firmly establishing what's what.

There are more of those dear friends struck senseless by Mother of the Year: Believer in Fairy Tales and Past Lives Recaller me finds herself on the floor with hands, feet and wings tied up when it's still morning. The day wants planning, the children sent to school, emails answered. 'You forgot to buy milk yesterday and the bottom of the flour jar is showing!' is the unequivocal assessment of the situation.

Now I remember Freya, the Goddess of Creativity in me. She steps out with queenly grace and the train of her dress sweeps the Married Woman, busying herself at the porridge pot, and the know-all Mother of the Year away from the centre of the world to the borderlands. The Goddess of Creativity makes me reach for my laptop and write down my dreams. She makes me write poems, drift aimlessly along moonlit streets, seek out some lovely view or park bench. She makes me remember words and moments, rummage in the library, read and be inspired. Being in the realm of this goddess I have seen colours shimmering around words ever since childhood. With them you can create paintings that you can taste and smell.

I feel the Goddess of Creativity breathing on the back of my

neck and whispering, 'There is always some blue in depth and shadows, there is always yourself. It's good to begin from the depths. You'll be able to work out the lightness and other decorative embellishments later.' Freya's words invigorate me.

Behind the Goddess of Creativity? Who's that lurking there? My lifelong, dangerous friend who has many names: Pegasus Tamer, Parnassus Demolisher, Tower of Babel Destroyer, Inner Critic who decisively tears down half of the creative work I've done. This character surreptitiously sticks an axe in my hand and says, to incite me, 'That whole business of choosing a mother of the year is so grotesque and far removed from real life. Just strike it down with one song! And write to *Sirp*[*] about how, at a Writers' Union poetry evening yesterday you were forced onto someone's lap. Give it the title 'Alpha Males and Weeping Bolete Mushrooms'. This instigator instills in me the conviction that 'words have tails, words have horns, images have fangs, don't be gentle!'

And who's that standing there with a giant rake, raking the sea? I don't even know what name to give her — Eternal Seeker? One from whom you can't tear out the yearning in her breast? Maybe today will be the day she finds what she's looking for? The body of a one-time love, King Solomon's crown, or a bottle containing a letter with a seal from long ago? Another time she sits for days on end on the riverbank with a big sand sifter, sifting river sand. Not normal sand though, but word-sand. Maybe she'll sift out a grain of gold? Word-Sand Sifter... is that her name?

I remember a dream from last night. In the mist at the river there was a mill. A nightingale was piping in the cold spring night and I had turned into a colourful kingfisher. I was whirling in and out of hollows in the riverbank, looking for secret words that would bring the flux of time to light. I kept plunging into the cavities in the sandy bank and coming out with fresh words wriggling in my beak. The miller swept them into his bag and poured them into the mill hopper.

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* Sirp: the leading Estonian cultural weekly.

Now, as I lie here in my bed watching the morning light quivering behind the curtains, Freya counsels me, 'Look, as soon as you stop, as soon as no one does the sifting work any more, your tiny language and culture will disappear. It will become meaningless and marginal. The larger languages' wealth of vocabulary and cultural abundance will sail over us like a three-masted sailing ship over a child's bark boat.'

My word-sand sifting job gives me work all day long and doesn't leave me alone even in my sleep. I have two missing lines in a poem. Two open rhymes. A song still doesn't have a last verse. Will I manage to sift out grains of gold with the next sifterful, and by doing wordplay somersaults create never before heard images and clarify my meaning?

There are another two versions of me coming to blows with the others trying to grab my day for themselves. First of all of course there's Magpie, that vain bird. Sometimes Mother of the Year, Married Woman and Freya are still fast asleep when Magpie lures me out to the shops. 'Buy what you want, spoil yourself! You've earned it!' Magpie chatters in my ear. 'How are you supposed to manage without a silk dress, body lotion, an eyelash curler and toning hair balsam?' Magpie has a miraculous ability to give me vitality and take me out of the grey everyday, although sometimes her chattering drives away all the gentler winged creatures in me. Swan, Partridge and Phoenix aren't even half as lively as Magpie.

And finally, the version of me that could live her whole life helping others — being a friend and relative. I've only just begun to understand that this part of my personality comes at the expense of the other roles. I could go round as Mother Theresa, helping and listening, bringing seekers of love together, blowing on injured souls. This friend role gives me so much food for thought that if I didn't weave those stories into my work from time to time with Freya's help, I could, for lack of time, bury all hope of self-realisation.

Unexpectedly, my sleepy child, who has moved in and manoevred herself in with her pillow at my feet in the middle of the night, kicks me in the face. I press my hurting nose and flushed cheek against Silver's salty bicep for a moment. Of course he interprets it the way he always interprets my approaches.

'Not now, not now...' I mutter in his ear, using the cliché so well-known from films, and feel myself at that moment boxing the ear of another vital part of me, namely Sensual Lover. I get up and stumble into the kitchen.

I make porridge without milk, and pancakes without flour and at the same time realise that now I have totally become aware of myself. I wonder if a caravan camel has the same feeling when he wakes up and discovers that he isn't a free animal after all, but rather a small part of someone else's plan, and the space between his humps has been stuffed full of bundles?...

A pity that in the meantime night fell and all my colourful roles managed to be forgotten. Yesterday evening I got on with the whole caravan load. I felt charming and my heart was full of secret plans.

At breakfast I read this chapter to Silver. 'I have so many women, a whole harem!' exclaims this man from the Häädemeeste area, intoxicated as he is from every draught of fresh air, in his innate optimism.

THE SHED CAVALIER

I sit in the car recovering from last week's Mother Tongue Day tour. I had a total of thirteen readings and concerts — some on my own, some with Silver, my mother Ly and my band Naised Köögis.

Silver is full of brio as we drive out of Tartu. He takes a map-reading break at a bus stop, sticks his head out of the sunroof, sniffs the spring air, and calls out, stretching his hand towards the sky, 'I'm so happy! Greetings to you, you wide open fields! Farewell, Tartu frog pond! South Estonia, this is where I come from!'

Yes, Tartu is too narrow for Silver. His eye is used to the open sea. Maybe he is even afflicted by a bit of claustrophobia here in the marshy mists of this university town? When we were looking for somewhere to live in Tartu, nowhere was good enough for him. Even if a flat was spacious by Tartu standards, Silver was unambiguous in his judgement: it's like a birdcage!

I've come along on his South-Estonia expedition because I feared I would do nothing but clean if I stayed at home. That isn't exactly the best way to spend a rest day after a week of thirteen public appearances.

'Oh, if you only knew, you people of Otepää parish, what joy is rolling into your yard right now,' Silver sighs as he puts his foot down on the accelerator. 'Oh my dears, those of you who haven't managed to tidy your homes, clear out your sheds, euro-renovate

your outbuildings, put up a glamping site or glass house! Here I come, your jackpot, your salvation, to take the Arts of Survival* of all of us into Europe!'

The thing is, Silver is looking for a shed in Otepää parish. He needs to find an especially authentic ramshackle building where he can present a shed concert within the framework of Tartu 2024 European Capital of Culture. It will be called 'Overtones of South-Estonian Country Sheds'. I try to explain to Silver that people may not go along with such a dubious undertaking. Not everyone is dreaming of having a concert or café in their yard. Silver laughs and tells me to wait and see how enthusiastically he will be greeted. He feels like a passionate shed cavalier, who the countryfolk will be wrangling over to please before the day is out.

It's impossible to rein him in. He goes oooooh...! and aaaaah...! whenever he catches sight somewhere of an old tractor or a roof fallen askew. I remind him that in town that sort of house bears a sign saying 'Caution! Danger!', but Silver counters, 'Don't make me laugh! This is where real life begins!'

He turns into every farmyard and looks around as if it all belonged to him. Striding towards the house from the car, he has the gait of a crowing cock.

'Did you know that this place here is the beating heart of Europe?' he asks a grizzled old lady.

I sink down deeper into the car seat so that not even the top of my head can be seen.

'Yes-yes, very good!' I hear Silver's businesslike voice through the open car window. 'Where could the audience sit? There's some kind of beams over here — Berliners are dreaming of this very sort of mossy logs. We'll do it round Midsummer, yes! The visitors could get off at Puka railway station, couldn't they? Super! Let them walk a bit. We'll put up signs showing the way! I've got a lighting man coming, too. We'll hang a chain of lights from this tree over to the shed!'

---

* Arts of Survival: Theme of 2024 Tartu European Capital of Culture..

'Ah, so you want to set the place alight, do you?' says the little old lady with a hearing aid.

'The woman of this house is very hard of hearing. We'd need to do too much explaining,' decides Silver, getting into the car. Our journey continues.

I look at the farms sliding past. Silver takes pictures of the outbuildings. The sheds are slanting and drooping, the doors can barely be opened. He is looking for the sort of shed with a tractor showing and the wreck of a car. A shed with layers of different times — a brace and bit, a horse rake, a brush harrow, ploughs and stacks of wood. A layer of shifting cultivation could show through from beneath the Soviet machines! By means of the sheds he is looking for a comprehensive understanding of our own traditional culture — tools that would tell the story of our culture's art of survival. As a man from the village of Treimani, the idea of a shed full of vitality is kept alive somewhere in the bottom of his mind, and right now that idea is making him dance. He's skipping around and stroking every cat, rubbing every horse, and scratching every dog.

Next we land up in a yard full of scrap. Silver's eyes light up like an alien's. He senses spiritual kin nearby. From the depth of his car he digs out two Montecristo cigars given to him at New Year's, to have a smoke with the man of the house and talk things over with him. But on the steps he is met by an elderly woman, who upon seeing him, adjusts her multi-coloured hairdo.

Silver starts energetically waving his hands about, and with a sense of horror I hear again the talk about Europe's beating heart. The woman is visibly disappointed, takes a Calvin Klein ski hat out of her pocket and pulls it on her head.

'I was wondering if you might have an original old shed?' Silver asks, getting down to business.

It seems the woman's husband legged it years ago, but all his scraps are lying around all over the place and the shed is still standing.

'Could I see it?'

'What for?' the woman wants to know.

Silver is perplexed. A question has formed in his mind — 'Don't you want me to give a concert here? I'd play a bit of rake and make the scythe sing!?' But it seems somehow inappropriate to voice it. 'Let's see if we can organise a concert outside your shed and use your old tools as sound-making instruments,' he says, trying to make his wishes understood.

The woman tempts Silver with coffee and, oh horror, they actually step inside together. It won't be so easy to get away from this woman!

But just a few minutes later Silver gets in behind the wheel and laughs that they didn't get as far as the coffee, because the woman had started explaining to him in teacherly tones, 'I know a very good place where you could give a concert — the community centre! People play instruments and others listen; not in a shed, my boy, no one will come here.'

'She doesn't understand what a treasure she is sitting on,' says Silver regretfully. 'She doesn't use the shed herself, but won't let me use it as a stage.'

Children smile at Silver and some girl asks him for an autograph at Nõuni village shop. 'Maybe turn back towards home now?' I suggest. But Silver promises to take me for a meal instead at Ugandi restaurant. Every rusty bit of chain and barbed wire that he spots on the roadside is dear to him and he lifts them carefully into the boot. 'What if I string a wooden plough with them...' he fantasizes.

At one farm there are sheep. The family wants to talk about them and even show them to us. But Silver decides on a frontal attack and asks, 'Where do you keep the wood?'

I make absolutely sure I can't be seen.

'Where it's growing,' I hear the woman answer, with a hint of misgiving, through the open car window.

'No, I mean your firewood.'

'We're not going to start telling that to a stranger,' is the curt reply.

'Next time we should bring something along, Tartu 2024 souvenirs and little flags,' observes the ever-optimistic Silver. I try to tell him that maybe somewhere there's an old fire-brigade shed, or a woodshed at some community centre. You might have more luck with them. But Silver is already an expert on local traditions and he knows that over yonder there's a hill where people used to go to look at the full moon, and that the old farmer at that far-away farm was ill and only got up in spring to listen to the birds singing. Somewhere in a distant village there was said to live a man called Kuuri-Kuuno*, who had already been recommended to him several times, although one man at the shop had warned him about Kuuno as well.

Silver rejoices; 'Kuuri-Kuuno — just think, what a name! Bullseye! If we could just find his sheds now!'

We turn the car towards Otepää again. Soon we can eat.

'You, my little Rapla girl, I won't say anything other than you're still my girl, I love you with a passion!' Silver warbles. Refusals just won't put him off. He plays the harmonica, steers the car with his knees, plays the ukelele, crowing, 'Just a bit more luck ahead, I'll be sitting on top of a shed!'

Speeding along on the hilly road between villages, Silver starts composing 'Dripping Eternite Elegy'. He stops for a moment and listens to the water dribbling off the roof of an abandoned pub, spins the wheel of a tipped-over garden wheelbarrow, records the ringing, ticking sound of the spokes, makes an obligatory European Capital of Culture Facebook post, and tags Tartu 2024. From my phone I give him a big red heart.

At Ugandi restaurant, along with my coffee, I get a yellow rolled up piece of paper. 'There's a saying on that,' says the waitress with a rigid air. Sullenly she hands one of these yellow rolls to Silver as well. Maybe she's annoyed that Silver's boots are so muddy?

Silver doesn't notice the woman's demeanour and asks cheerfully, 'You wouldn't be able to recommend a shed where I could

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* Kuuri-Kuuno: literally, Shed-Kuuno.

give a concert, would you?' The waitress livens up a little, consults the person behind the counter, and answers with a giggle, 'Yes, I can, Go to Kuuri-Kuuno, it's not far. Over the bridge and turn left.'

I unroll the yellow paper. There is a David Russell quote: 'The hardest thing to learn in life is which bridge to cross and which to burn'. I show it to Silver and attempt to explain, 'Look, Russell says as well that you need to choose your way. There's no point in running head first into a wall any longer.' But Silver has another coffee and continues composing his new work, which he plans to call ' Mating Beetles Minuet'.

The next half hour is spent on Silver doing a Tik Tok live at every bus stop, enthusiastically telling young fans about how he's looking for a shed where he can give a concert. 'Go to see Kuuri-Kuuno!' one commentator recommends, adding three smiley faces and the relevant co-ordinates. Silver joyfully ploughs through the Vana-Otepää countryside with his Renault. He feels he is on the right road.

We land up on the grounds of the Gustav Wulff-Õis House Museum. I read on a sign at the farm that 'Gentle Nightingale, Where Are You Hurrying?' is one of his poems, set to music. I stroll around under the old linden trees on the banks of the river Nüpli. I recall that a literary summer school used to be organised here. There is not a soul in the museum yard. There is a calmness in the air and at the same time a restlessness. For some reason I feel I shouldn't be here. But the brown signs directed our way here to the museum! I walk over the yard back to the car, humming the nightingale song.

A little while later Silver turns off the forest road into a farmyard. A strange-looking old man wearing a padded jacket, a spangled tubeteika on his head, and multi-coloured yoga trousers is standing by the wood pile. That's Kuuri-Kuuno! Help! I resort to my lying-low tactics, but leave the window open a crack to be able to hear.

'I'm Silver Sepp, music man!'

'I was expecting you,' the man of the house replies with an all-knowing look and adds, as he stretches out his hand in greeting, 'Kuuno, mantra-man' (or did he say tantra-man?).

Silver makes a spirited opening move. 'I've come to see if I can find an old-fashioned shed full of stuff where here, in the beating heart of Europe's Capital of Culture, I could organise a concert. In June, when the nightingales are singing!'

Kuuno looks at him for a long time. For a while it seems like he isn't going to reply at all, then says in mellow tones, 'I have got a shed, come look.'

Oho, I think, is luck finally going to shine on Silver?

The somewhat extravagant fellow beckons Silver, who is hopping around like a crow for sheer joy, to follow him. Kuuno's shed is some distance away under big linden trees. It is small and slanting, with a truly archaic appearance. Silver stoops down and steps in over the threshold. The old man nonchalantly closes the door behind him, takes the key off a nail and locks it.

Silver rattles and knocks the door. I imagine my husband might be stricken by an attack of claustrophobia there in that narrow shed. Should I go and help him?

Kuuno moves a few steps away from the shed and calls to Silver in soothing tones, 'This shed is the very best place to meditate. There is a powerful column of energy flowing through it. Do you already feel it, music man? But you won't understand it until you've sat here a while. I've always locked visitors and postmen from town in here first.'

The knocking fades away. For some reason I feel the imprisonment is doing Silver good. The eternite roof is dripping. Beetles are mating. What could be better? I wait to see what happens. The first blackbird revels in song.

When, after half an hour, the old man approaches the shed carrying a jar of maple sap and unlocks the door, a calm, composed man steps out with his pocket notebook scribbled full of fresh musical notation and lyrics — a man who doesn't mention the beating heart of Europe for some time. When he finally does

bring it up again, Kuuno steers him smoothly towards the car.

It's already getting dark. We drive out onto the main road. I hand Silver his yellow rolled up maxim. He opens it and reads it to me: 'It is an art to understand that the present moment is all we have.'

'That's exactly what I thought about there in the shed!' he exclaims. 'He's really ace, that Kuuno! For a moment I thought I would stand up and walk away with the shed, it has no foundation. But you don't get that sort of creative break every day. Listen to this new song.'

And I listen. It has the trickling of the dripping eaves of a shed, the breathing of the headland between fields under the melting snow, yearning that makes the soul tender and, in the darkening day, tears away the tatters of clouds. Grey sheds, glaring petrol stations, muddy roads and clean ones — for a moment they all seem to be covered in gold. This moment is all we have. Maybe I had to come along to capture this moment and be the first to hear Silver's new song.

Translated by ILMAR LEHTPERE

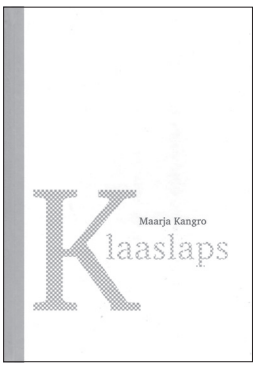


MAARJA KANGRO
(1973)

THE GLASS CHILD

What harrowing thoughts and emotions does a woman face when she finds out that the fetus she is carrying has no chance of survival? This isn't a self-help book or a heartbreaking tear-jerker, but a measured and intellectual novel about womanhood.

Translations: German, Hungarian, Latvian, Lithuanian, Serbian



Maarja Kangro
KLAASLAPS
Nähtamatu Ahv 2016, 208 p.

Spring 2014

[...]

But the bleeding started again two days later. Dark red blood. It stopped for a few hours, then resumed. I was just about to leave on another trip. The Civitella Ranieri residency program in Umbria, Italy. It was an American program — the artist Marko Mäetamm had recommended me.

Dark red gunk oozed through my sanitary pads.

Dr. Ehrenberg scheduled me for a blood test, which showed my hCG level was at 1080. It was a little low for that stage of a sound pregnancy, but the level was still high overall — something had been growing vigorously, and the gestational sac should have been visible at that point in the pregnancy.

"What are you here for?!" the blonde woman at Mustamäe Hospital's emergency room snapped at me. I should have known they didn't have a gynecologist on duty, obviously!

The wait time at the East Tallinn Central Hospital was over an hour, but the pains had now reappeared and throbbed with increasing intensity. Son of a bitch. Go to the Pelgulinn Hospital, a well-meaning medic told me, they don't have a line right now.

There, I was told my uterus certainly showed no sign of pregnancy. Something was probably developing in the right fallopian tube, the image of which was cloudy.

"You'll be staying here. This is a dangerous situation."

Pains. They were trying to wring my insides to tiny bits, the fuckers. Yes, I was aware that a tear in the fallopian tube can be deadly. It would've been more impressive to kick the bucket back in Donbass, during my travels, but it really made no difference in the end. You can't design your life's narrative; no one can.

My flight to Rome was scheduled to leave at 8 AM. From there, I was supposed to travel to Perugia, from which I would somehow make my way to the Civitella Ranieri castle, somewhere near Umbertide. Do I have to stay here at the hospital now, end of story?

"You can go fetch some things from home," the doctor on duty told me. "There's enough time for that."

I was given a painkiller injection, and the miracle drug started working almost immediately.

My sister Kirke was celebrating her birthday, the last to begin with a three, out at our country house. They'd started early, and Jaanus had gone during the morning shift. I went and sat at the table with them for a while, too. The pains had disappeared, and that gave me a detached sense of elevation. I don't remember what I thought about on the way there. It was an emergency situation, unresolved. There was no despondency to speak of — my emotions had frozen up.

By the hour I was there, late in the evening, only Kaido Ole, Raul Keller, and his wife Hello were left at the party. Kirke was disappointed that the baked fish hadn't turned out, but I recounted my impressions of Ukraine. I got on a roll and laid it all out: the prices, the attitudes, the flavors, the uniforms, and I gave crisis tourism my full recommendation. The painkillers had done their job, and my tongue was loose. In the end, I grabbed my toothbrush and went back to the hospital in the middle of the night.

The West Tallinn Central Hospital (WTCH) provided gowns for its patients. They were quite impressive rags: as wide as imaginable, already rendered tattered and threadbare years ago from repeated washing. Mine was too short, but I put it on it like a hero donning a jester's motley. I checked to see if "*Минздрав*" could still be seen stamped in purple Russian lettering between the green flowers printed on the fabric, but the Soviet vestige had apparently been rinsed away over time. They didn't do anything with me that night, regardless, even though my hCG had risen a little and was now at 1130. I sat in the reception lounge, wearing my motley, reading about ectopic pregnancy online, and sending e-mails.

I slept fitfully and woke early, thinking about my Finnair flight that should be taking off soon. Now, check-in was open; now, boarding. It was the first time in my life I'd missed a flight. I took a couple of pictures of the ratty hospital gowns and sent them to friends with the header "WTCH Spring Collection."

I wasn't given breakfast at the hospital since they would want to remove an ectopic pregnancy by operation, meaning along with the fallopian tube. Even so, I'd decided I wouldn't allow any parts to be cut out of me. Like an animal. I intended to defend my body's integrity. Animals bite; no discussion.

Seeing my animal-like adamancy, the young doctor informed me there was also a chemical option for terminating the fetus: a cancer treatment that kills young, rapidly multiplying cells.

Methotrexate. A chemotherapy drug. Causes liver damage — *may cause*. It was just the concept: chemotherapy. That word.

"Wouldn't you like to have another hCG test done?" I asked.

"There's no point in us doing them so often."

My hCG level had risen the night before, but not as much as it should have with the development of a normal pregnancy.

"Maybe it's dropped now?"

I'd read that a large number of ectopic pregnancies terminate and resolve all on their own.

"Fine, I can have you give a new blood sample," the young woman said acquiescently.

I informed her I still intended to travel to Italy.

"You shouldn't do that under any circumstances," the doctor said.

"But if my hCG level drops? I'll take out health insurance."

"Regardless. If something happens and the insurance company finds out that you knew about the ectopic, they won't pay a cent."

Well, then that was that. Come what may: I felt I just couldn't keep on lollygagging around here in Estonia. Did I really have to see Tallinn's streets throughout the coming weeks?

I'd drown. Suffocate. No.

I let them draw blood again, signed a paper acknowledging I was leaving the hospital at my own discretion, and went to pay the €1.80 for my night in the ward. The Estonian-speaking staff treated me with particular deference, as they'd heard my impressions of Odessa on the evening news. "You — you were in *Crimea*, weren't you?!" one chipper woman exclaimed.

I walked back to the city center since I'd asked Mac to take my car out of the hospital parking lot for the night. Dissociated from the world, I ambled through the spring green of the Pelgulinn neighborhood and up into the Old Town. To me, it already felt like fall. I went to a board meeting at the Writers' House and stepped out for a moment when I received a call from an unknown number. Now, it was just over 900. Huzzah — I can exit

this autumn-like month of May (what a forced oxymoron).

After the meeting, I took a second-floor table at the restaurant on the corner, and searched online for a new ticket to Italy. Jaanus came, we ate, and the sun gradually started to peek out from behind the clouds. I watched the people passing by below and said that from my perspective, it seems strange that global overpopulation has become a problem and that humankind still exists in the first place. Unfortunately, the restaurant only had semi-dry red wine that day.

The Civitella castle complex and its rose garden were still chilly in May, and my thick-walled, high-ceilinged apartment was warmed by just a single tiny space heater. Most of the Civitella Ranieri Foundation fellows were Americans, the funding came from Americans, and the program was run by a sensitive American named Dana.

"Wow, isn't that amazing? Isn't it just *terrific*?" the Americans responded to everything I told them about myself or my work. I said I planned to finish, or rather look over, my translations of Agamben during my stay at Civitella.

"Wow, isn't that amazing?"

The rudiments of sarcasm that the intelligent individuals undoubtedly possessed surfaced only by the third or fourth day, but "*amazing-terrific-fabulous*" mode kept running even then — such were their cultural rhythms and temperatures. I'd always thought myself a total whiz in compliment mode, but I couldn't keep up with the Americans. Better genuine dryness than cheerful exertion, for now.

But what do you know? My long-time acquaintance Jānis Petraškevičs — a young, discreet, introverted Latvian composer — also happened to be at Civitella. Jānis admitted that the Americans' compliment-rich conversation manner was like a searing hot shower for him. At one point, he couldn't take it anymore and started coming down to lunch an hour later on

purpose. Then, he could pick up his food thermos in peace and go back to work.

At a few international festivals, I'd seen Americans who were so worn out from being "nice" and the imperative of enthrallment for supporting their neighbor that they would rather withdraw to their hotel rooms to be uber-nice people alone or go running in the woods instead of attending common events. How long can you last, really? Still, they carried on being uber-nice when they ultimately resurfaced.

The current guests at Civitella also included two Brazilians and the Mongol Mend-Ooyo. The others thought he didn't speak anything other than Mongolian and were amazed to hear us chatting. What language is that? Ah, of course. Russian, sure. Mend-Ooyo was extremely proud that he had had the opportunity to represent his country at the London Olympics. He read to me one of his poems that contained a profusion of the letter õ. *Õ — an eastern aspirate,* I mused.

Each of us had the opportunity to show or read our works to the others: Monday nights were performance nights, a hot-shower special show for all. I read my own amazing, terrific, fabulous poems on the evening of May 19th, but I started feeling unusual pains again that night. Fuck, the bleeding was back, too. It worsened as the night progressed, and the pain started coming in waves. I looked up the numbers for local medical offices and called, but naturally, no one picked up. Even so, I didn't have the nerve to dial the emergency number, so as not to startle the Americans with an ambulance in the middle of the night. If I truly started dying, then I'd call it. But I didn't, and I even got a little sleep.

The others left for Arezzo in the morning. They were already murmuring in cultural tones about the monk Guido (our party did include a few composers), but I asked Diego where I might be able to go for an ultrasound. Diego Mencaroni was the residence administrator and was running for the Perugia City Council with *Partito Democratico*. He was a serious left-wing politician with a

conscience, who — unlike most of his compatriots — wouldn't object to wearing a stained shirt if need be.

I told him that their small-town Umbertide Hospital wasn't answering the phone.

There's no such option in Umbertide, Diego said. An ultrasound — are you kidding?! His wife had given birth twice at the Perugia Hospital, which was said to have the best gynecologists in Italy. A university hospital. The compassionate Diego called someone — a Doctor Epicoco, who had supervised his wife's births.

Is there really someone with that name? Epicoco?

There really is.

Standing in the lobby of the gynecology department's emergency room was a statue of the Virgin Mary, who had heaps of prayer beads and other trinkets hung around her neck. The floor around the statue was covered in flower vases, small wreaths, and letters and cards. Just look at these pagans, even bringing their idols to a university hospital. Wild fetishism. It certainly would have been moving for me at some point, but not now. A fetish — something associated with hope and love. Faith, hope, love, fetish. The emotional landscape around me had been wiped away, so harshly over-illuminated that it was destroyed. That's what I'd thought.

A pretty red-haired girl, the emergency doctor, told me the ultrasound showed blood in my abdominal cavity. She stared at me solemnly.

"*Signora, dobbiamo ricoverarla*." We have to keep you here at the hospital.

The sunlight was incessant. It was 77 degrees outside. Fuck.

"I really don't know about that," I stammered. "The hospital, hmm."

"If your fallopian tube tears, you could die." (Here it goes again, nothing but dying.)

"I'd like to make a quick call first."

"Go ahead."

I called Dr. Ehrenberg. We'd actually exchanged e-mails that

morning, and he'd recommended that I stop by a gynecologist's office somewhere, showing no signs of panic. I'd hoped, irrationally, that he'd somehow save me from this situation — from the confines of the turquoise hospital walls — over the phone. He said he trusted his Italian colleagues' opinions.

The red-haired doctor started dictating to a nurse what to write on my files. "GEU" was to be recorded as the diagnosis.

"*Cosa vuole dire GEU?*" I asked. "*Gravidanza extrauterina*," the girl said slowly and clearly, like a young teacher.

"*Ah sì, certo*."

9 January 2015, Friday, 8:25 AM

It was still a jet-black morning. Stupid violet muck. But back then, I'd even pushed the numbing effect of an Estonian winter out of my mind; I'd grown a padding of naïve delusions around me. Amiable and curious, I was — like I was on a trip abroad. Like it was going to start getting brighter now.

I picked Jaanus up on Herne Street. The dusty bigger throughways: Liivalaia, Narva Road, Pirita Road. I don't remember what we talked about. Maybe I spoke of the book release I'd just had in Tartu. About how the "Tartu Food Club" attended. Berk told me it was a food club. Older men who apparently Google the local cultural events every morning. About how I accidentally hauled a box of Chablis meant for personal consumption into the Tartu Literary House, and only realized my mistake too late. Yes, I suppose I talked about that, among other things.

We handed our overgarments to the coat check at Fertilitas: I my black coat, Jaanus, that same beige jacket. I told the woman at the front desk, a blond with a neutral demeanor, that we'd come for my first-trimester screening.

I felt proud, of course — you bet. Proud of myself like Frankenstein's monster suddenly turned into a real human being. Others aren't aware that it's such a big deal for the monster — becoming an ordinary person — but for the monster, it's a real party. Human functions along with all their troubles and hassles!

I'd been promised 3D imagery of the baby. The doctor at the Mustamäe Fertilitas location had said it's a very emotional procedure. The baby's eyes are still closed just like — look — just like this.

"And then they'll tell you everything is fine," she said. Her intonation was suggestive, falling.

I had already seen the tiny being wriggling its arms and legs on a regular ultrasound machine. A fuzzy little white aquatic creature against a black background. The amplified heartbeats had been picked up several times already, sounding like a speeding train coming through a transistor radio. Wild and solemn.

Now, we were going to see the child on a bigger machine that was only available at the suburban Viimsi Fertilitas. The overhead lights were switched off in Doctor Reet Laasik's office (was it room no. 12?), and the ultrasound image was projected onto a wide screen. The child jerked its leg, and Jaanus laughed. Dr. Laasik moved her probe back and forth across my belly, saying nothing. The black, white, and gray image shifted and rippled on the screen, displaying the baby's skeleton and heartbeat clearly. She was still moving the probe around. This way and that. We all fell silent. The little being wriggled, but we weren't laughing anymore.

The doctor asked: "How old are you?"

"Forty-one."

"Mm-hm."

"How's it looking?"

"Not everything's quite right here."

That was the button. One person presses it and the other gets shocked, but the shock doesn't actually set in right away. Our emotional mechanism doesn't work that fast. In an unfeignedly formal tone, I asked: "So, what's wrong?"

The doctor appeared irritated by what she had to say. Her voice was high-pitched and aggravated.

"Let me have a look here first! Calm down!"

Calm down? Neither Jaanus nor I had demonstrated any signs

of the opposite. The doctor was visibly riled.

We didn't say anything else after her bark for calm, and after a while, she asked: "Have you two been making all these attempts together?"

It was a pregnancy by artificial insemination. Everything was written in my file. It was my little wonder of the world — the last attempt I could make that would be covered by the state health insurance fund.

It had been right here at Fertilitas that, five years ago, I found out an IVF would likely be my only chance since my fallopian tubes were impassable. I got the bad news after a laparoscopy, but I still gave the doctor a poetry collection released by the Apollo bookstore chain. It was titled *Book*, and included poems that had been commissioned from Estonian poets. I myself had compiled it. I don't know why I gave him a gift; it's strange to consider even now. At the time, I hadn't yet undergone a single operation or any serious procedures. I hadn't even had a tooth pulled, and my knowledge of how people behaved around doctors dated back to my Soviet-era childhood. I'd heard it's common to give them something after a health problem crops up. Boxes of chocolate, cognac, and whatnot. The doctor, a well-meaning man, absent-mindedly leafed through the poets' pictures and asked me about the Orthodox church behind Joel Sang: "Where's that at?" Upon hearing it was Riga, he said a-ha, I see — other places in the world would've been more familiar.

But now, this question from Dr. Laasik. Those attempts.

"Yes."

"This just isn't working with you two," the doctor said.

"Well, what's wrong, then?"

The wave of emotional dizziness was just hitting me. Down. Does the baby have Down — does it? No, the doctor said. It isn't Down. The nuchal fold is completely fine. It turned out that all the risks associated with age were cleared, that's not what it was.

"You see, it lacks part of the cranial bone. Above the nape, the brain is only covered by a soft membrane. You can see it here. Its

brain is exposed to the amniotic fluid."

What a fucking nuisance. That was the first thought that crossed my mind. The cranial bones haven't developed on time, and now they have to catch up, and their growth will take time and it'll just be one never-ending nightmare and saga. It took a couple of seconds for the notion to sink in that if those bones hadn't formed by now, they never would.

"But the soft membrane? Won't the soft membrane protect it?" Jaanus asked.

No. The amniotic fluid will gradually wash the child's brain away.

The baby stretched.

Acrania and anencephaly.

Of course, I knew what those words meant. Everyone who's studied philology does. Even anyone who's attended a decent high school should. Acrania, astronomy, anophthalmia. And why not apodia, acheiria? Anyone could come up with words like that. What I didn't know was those kinds of conditions do exist.

When I was 11, we went on a class field trip to the Healthcare Museum, where we were shown a plethora of pictures of malformed children and birth traumas. There were all kinds of bundles and formations, cleft lips, missing limbs, infants with hydrocephalus ("water-heads"), and I think even double-headed babies. Whether there were any with acrania among the photographs there, I can't say anymore. Maybe there were. "Children, don't smoke!" was the main message they repeated. Don't eat sweets and do fresh-air activities. I was thin, had the best traffic light reaction, and was praised for it. We'd called each other "water-heads" as an insult some years earlier, and now, it was unleashed again with gusto for a period.

A couple dozen years later, I'd heard of developmental disorders caused by a lack of folic acid, which can affect the neural tube. The term *spina bifida* — a cleaved backbone — stood out. But now, expecting a child, I hadn't wanted to research what exactly was behind those developmental disorders. I presume

most pregnant women don't. And most of them never find out. According to the pamphlet I was given before the screening, 1% of children are born with serious deformities. I'd absentmindedly leafed through it before Christmas.

"When would you like to terminate?" the doctor asked.

I felt my knees start to tremble just slightly. It was something I was unable to control, oddly enough. Not that I was particularly trying, of course. Maybe only I could see it.

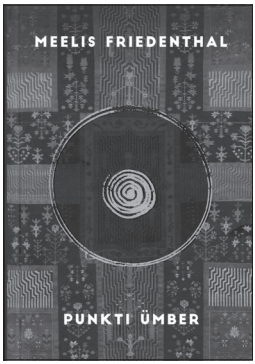
Translated by ADAM CULLEN



MEELIS FRIEDENTHAL
(1973)

AROUND A POINT

A trance-like novel about longing and love, finding oneself alone and conversations with the deceased, catastrophes and leaving one's homeland, modern art, magic, and occultism in the early 20th century.



Meelis Friedenthal
PUNKTI ÜMBER
Varrak 2023, 312 p.

HIS MEMORIES BEGIN HERE

His memories begin when he was quite small, his mother sent him simultaneously to a music and art teacher, and so, at the age of seven and unbeknownst to himself, he embodied the dichotomy inherent in all Western civilization. At least, that's how he explained it to himself. He had to listen to notes played on a piano and sing them back exactly. Then, the very next day, he had to sit in a drawing class and focus on objects, their shadows and curves. This listening and watching, the tension between eye and ear, remained within him for a very long time, and if by chance this matter had not resolved itself on its own, he would probably have been between the two even now,

like Buridan's ass. And he would perhaps have starved to death like that metaphorical donkey. You must choose from which haystack to eat, you must not hesitate!

This competition between seeing and hearing, the true roots of the occidental worldview, were planted in him in Odessa, where his family had moved from Estonia. There were good schools in Odessa: a German school, a military school, an art school, and, of course, a university. There were also several private tutors, art teachers, and music teachers. Most of them were Jews. Some were keeping up with the times, and some were conservative, but generally, they had little resemblance to the caricatures that were concocted about them over and over again. Of course, religion was important to them; Brodsky Synagogue was always full of people who flowed inside in their thousands and where world-famous musicians frequently performed as cantors. Odessan Jews loved music.

He remembered the first time he went to his singing lesson in a house near the synagogue in the spring, hand-in-hand with his mother, stepping up the wide stairs with the dark red-coloured bannister directly at eye level. In his memories, Odessa's houses were spacious, with lofty, bright, and somehow oversized ceilings. He assumed that this was due to the fact that he himself was small at the time. Presumably, if it were now, he would see something else entirely different: filthy, cracked plaster, worn floorboards, patched-up laundry hanging in backyards, staggering, hacking drunks on the household staircase. But maybe he'd still sense the grandeur even now — Odessa was a world-class city after all. As he heard later in his long and complex difficult life, it was almost completely destroyed in World War II. He never returned to Odessa after escaping.

However, to try to get any sense of Odessa would be like Sergei Eisenstein's film 'Battleship Potemkin.' In the film, you watch as, from the top of the tremendously high stairs on Nikolayev Boulevard, Cossacks are mechanically killing ordinary inhabitants, women, children, and the disabled, and how a white

pram — improbably, without losing balance - is rolling dramatically down the stairs. While in the background appear neoclassical-style houses with plastered, ornamented high windows. These were the steps of his childhood, the scenes of his childhood, vast and spacious. This feeling is remembered. He could almost have been the child in that pram in Eisenstein's film; he was two years old during the 1905 revolution.

Of course, these things did not happen in Odessa as they are shown in the film. It was, after all, a Soviet communist propaganda film, and Eisenstein fantasised and sacrificed truth for artistic effect, but certainly, a number of people in the city were killed in the shooting. His mother spoke to him. But whether what he heard from his mother was the truth is a difficult question. Pontius Pilate did not receive an answer from the incarnated God himself, and he, Verdi Jürgenson, also never got a clear answer about the truth. You won't get an answer to that from this book, either.

Verdi's family must have been touched by those bloody events, but actually, everything continued after the revolution in almost the same way as before.

He walked up the wide stairs and stepped into the room with large windows, where his singing teacher sat at the tiny — baby-sized, as they were called — grand piano. The teacher himself was a lean man of great stature with a narrow strip of beard and myopic, dull eyes. He was at that piano as if he were sitting on a children's rocking horse, his knees bent and happy. He may have been indeed happy.

An intricate pattern was depicted on the inside of the raised piano lid, in blue, gold and red colours. That's where the sounds came from, reflected into the room from beneath the kaleidoscopic lid, oscillating off the white walls, brass curtain rods, and the round ceiling lamp. The boy looked at the piano; inside, there were metal tongues tinkering against a red velvet background like the veins of some kind of living creature. As in the slaughterhouse, where animal carcasses hang on hooks, the belly cavity

blossomed, opening like the mouth of hell. Father had shown that to him. "All life is like this," he had said. The boy looked, somehow, there was something wonderful hidden inside: animated sinews and tendons. At a swift command they could suddenly start vibrating again, the blood would begin to flow, the soul would reproduce into a living mass, and... a voice is heard. A moaning, crying, shrieking song.

He looked at the painted piano lid and felt it all. It was terrifying and tempting. Almost from the moment he stepped into the room until the moment he left, he kept his eyes on this kaleidoscopic world.

"Good day, Mr. Grinberg," he said and looked into the piano cavity. The cavity stared back at him, of course.

The cavity saw a boy wearing brown knee-high socks, short trousers and braces, who politely bowed to the teacher, stepped up to the music stand and started the exercises. The cavity watched him and committed him to memory. The cavity liked him even then.

Verdi had the notes in his head; he had an excellent auditory memory, performing all his pieces flawlessly. The sun shone through the window, the seagulls screeched outside, circling under the blue sky, and he sang like a soulful little animal. At the time, of course, he could not judge whether he sang well or badly, he just did everything that was expected of him. His mother told him sometime later, maybe during the period of illness, when he apathetically lay in bed and watched the wall, when he didn't want to interact with anyone, when his mother just sat by him and talked, to herself rather than to him, talking to make it easier for herself. She told him that he had been a very obedient child; something she had even worried about.

"You were such a good boy when you were little. You did everything you were told, didn't object, didn't get into trouble. I was afraid all the time that you would stay like this, to be used and pushed and pulled between others. I was afraid you'd be called a mama's boy."

Perhaps it was not difficult for the boy to do what was expected of him. He could handle everything.

His mother also expected him to go to drawing classes. These took place in an almost identical house, in the same way, under the tutelage of a Jewish teacher, in a similarly well-lit room with a high ceiling. It was a longer way there, and he climbed along the low wall by the sidewalk, where stone spheres had been placed at short distances; he liked this footpath. He climbed over the spheres, stood on top of a round stone ball, and looked down at his mother. Mother was tall, with bright clothes, golden hair and light blue eyes, gentle and pale, as if from paper. Mother's face was usually serious, even strict, but when she smiled, it changed completely. Her smile was golden, suddenly the harshness disappeared from her face, lips pursed, white teeth shone, a kind of brilliance emanated from them, which turned her into a fairy. As soon as she stopped smiling, a wish would arise to see her smile afresh, to look at her until this wonderful change would happen again. Everyone noticed it, everyone was waiting for the change. Therefore, when in the company of his mother, the people around kept looking at her, hoping to be a part of it. She didn't smile often, but the hope did not disappear. Whoever had drunk from this source always wanted to return to it.

"Come, Verdi," she said. "We're going to be late."

Verdi looked up at his mother; Mother wasn't smiling.

The boy took hold of his mother's hand, and they walked along quickly. Fallen leaves crunched under their feet, his mother's hand felt warm, and Verdi almost had to run to keep up with her.

Unlike the music lesson, other children also went to the drawing class. They stood neatly still behind their easels and started by drawing plaster cubes and spheres similar to those on the wall by the sidewalk. They later drew pitchers and vases, still-lifes, eyes, ears, lips, and other dismembered parts of the body. Their drawing teacher emphasised the details: the composition consists of small things. First, you need to learn the parts, and only then can one think about the whole. So he said.

They were not allowed to chat with each other or talk nonsense, so they stood and drew on their own, only sometimes half looking at the others — out of the corner of the eye — to see how far along someone was from their work, how well or badly others were doing. If there was no one for Verdi to compare himself to in music, then in drawing, there was no doubt — he was the most accurate. It cannot be said that he was the best since it is difficult to judge better or worse in drawing and painting, but accuracy can be measured. Shadow and light, proportions, perspective — these are expressed mathematically. This came out well for him. This is not praise, just a statement of fact. The teacher, Mr Nadel, did not engage with him any more or less than with the others, perhaps he considered it inappropriate to pay him more attention, and maybe the feelings of the other children were also at play, and economic considerations cannot be ruled out either. Unfortunately, economic considerations can never be ruled out. If other children were to lose their interest in drawing, then the teacher would lose his income, of course. You can't blame him for that. That's the way of society.

In any case, they drew, and Verdi observed the teacher, his mouth twitching over the other pictures, his fleeting smile at Verdi's drawing. The teacher was a very young man, he had long delicate fingers, freckled cheeks, a daring haircut, and watery, sad eyes, as if holding back tears. He never praised them, only corrected mistakes, pointing out what was wrong. In this way, Verdi learned early on to see mistakes, errors, shortcomings, and uncertainty.

How do you overcome the uncertainty, the ignorance, the stupidity, and reach beyond that, to beauty? They tried to explain it to him. Verdi's Latin teacher always repeated in class: "Pay attention! *Nosce te ipsum*. Know thyself, everything begins there. This very phrase was on the portico of the temple of the Oracle of Delphi, written in large letters. But you, snot-noses, you can see yourselves as little as you can see your own ears!"

Everyone laughed, it seemed funny, even though they didn't

understand it. They knew that the Latin teacher was a drunkard, sometimes struggling even to stay upright. He would just sit at the table, eyes red, waving his hand towards the blackboard, easily angered, staring out the window, despairing, and not paying them any attention. What could such a person teach boys about knowing themselves? What could such a person teach at all? However, it later turned out that the drunkard was right. Eventually, Verdi understood that it is only when a person, as they say, joins the *choir invisible*, is it possible to gain some knowledge of one's true nature.

Translated by SLADE CARTER



REIN RAUD
(1961)

PLAGUE TRAIN

It is 1911, and a young army medic of Estonian origin is on a train speeding east through the Russian Empire to Manchuria, straight into a plague epidemic. A novel about love and hate, infinity and death, but most of all, an infectious disease called communism – one that can seize individuals and entire societies alike.

Translations: German, Hungarian



Rein Raud
KATKURONG
Salv 2023, 256 p.

1. Verkhneudinsk—Chita, May 1911

The rush did not abandon them. Intoxicated (still!), primarily from the unknown that awaited ahead and from their own bravado as well, and even more so from the expanses surrounding them, flashing by outside the windows of the rail car *because* this is *what life is*! they giggled like children and none were able to stop, even when it crossed a line and became embarrassing. Jakob wasn't much bothered by the others' teasing, perhaps, but Sviridov certainly was: he was allowed to poke fun at his own short stature, and certainly did so on occasion, but whenever anyone else joked about it, he took the remark as an indecent insult, as mocking a companion who

may, admittedly, be a little unusual in some regards, but always impeccably held his own in any endeavor they tackled together. He wouldn't have been there otherwise. None of the young men knew exactly where the train was headed (even though any could have pointed it out on a map) or what kind of a world would be swallowing their youth, exactly. Nevertheless, they had to have realized it was happening already, even if they didn't admit it to themselves, because ten-ruble gold coins weren't handed out for free, much less lavishly: it was money that permeated all the way to their bones, and the acts done to get it couldn't just be washed off in a sauna.

And why should they be, anyway?! The young men were acting in the name of the Empire, of the double-headed eagle, and anything they were required to do had already received a nod of approval somewhere far away. Although the problem at hand was only publicly discussed on the middle pages of capital newspapers that were reserved for bothersome and unpleasant news, the bubonic plague bacteria (undoubtedly bothersome and unpleasant as well, particularly as it refused to be driven from the farthest peripheries of consciousness even at tranquil moments) had begun mowing victims down left and right late last year in Manchuria, including, obviously, the Chinese Eastern Railway Zone and Harbin, thereafter, crossing the state border. In Irkutsk, they'd even had to build a separate plague hospital next to the railway station to keep patients who'd contracted the disease on board from spreading it throughout the city. But that was just the beginning. The plague had penetrated as far as Samara, albeit briefly. Harbin was the worst sight—imagine: corpses simply left on the street because they piled up faster than proper burials could be arranged, especially as no one in their right mind would dare to touch them. In a way, the plague threatened the monarchy's very foundations: what was the railroad if not the metal skeleton of public order forcefully extending itself into the rest of the empire's limp and quivering chaos. But now, an invisible death travelled along that same

railroad, emerging from the chaos and rendering not only state control, but any control at all, trivial and absurd as it advanced. Obviously, it had to be halted. The issue finally worked its way up to the State Duma, where deputies made the unsurprising decision to deal a decisive counter-blow. Money was allocated, plans drafted, scouting began, and men—including them—were found. The plague had to be stopped, encircled, destroyed, its last traces wiped from the face of the Earth. Anything they could do to achieve that goal had to be carried out. The men were even given special uniforms, though not quite promoted to non-commissioned officers—still, even the visual elevation meant something. They were no longer just young men. They were someone.

They even had to give an oath (though one could question the significance of a non-voluntary oath that had to be given), meaning they were now part of a chain that began in their brains and hearts and ended in the clutches of the double-headed eagle's talons. If that was even the end. Yet, there was another oath, one much older, that they'd learned in Latin lessons. No one demanded they give it, though such a demand could certainly have been made: *primum non nocere*; first, do no harm—it hung above them, no matter that it wasn't binding. For what if the two oaths were to conflict? The double-headed eagle didn't find it reasonable in the very least for medical assistance to be provided in its name to someone who'd violated its boundary, weapon in hand. Or to any Orientals out in Manchuria who'd been the cause of the whole catastrophe in the first place.

Framed by train windows all the while: fields, then forests, then fields again, limitless. Endless. Mountains, for a time. And then forests again. Though they were entirely unlike those back home in Estonia, where woods were always a source of strength—these were too massive. They would devour and dissolve you into basic elements. Humans seemed to have no place in any of it. The verdant wall of majestic trees ran for hours and hours until it formed an almost inherent and monotonous background of

almost like the rattling of train wheels the gaze sliding along without discerning any individual tree anymore if it wasn't unusual in some respect—gray from disease or uprooted by wind or odd otherwise.

In Verkhneudinsk, where their train stopped for the night, the other guys dashed into the city with a swagger to look for vodka and generous girls, leaving only Jakob and Sviridov behind. Sviridov stared at him with that strange look of his. As if the two shared some kind of secret. Jakob had no real problem with booze, though he knew partaking would sadden his mother (especially in the staggering quantities that the men were undoubtedly allowing themselves in town). He did, however, find it impossible to imagine himself in the company of generous girls, because men don't have that certain appendage hanging between their legs for poking into just anything. Sviridov, on the other hand, never touched a drop. He appeared to be on the verge of telling Jakob something, but refrained from interrupting when Jakob pulled a book from his suitcase and absorbed himself in reading despite the dimness of the cabin. *Is that the Scripture*? the Greek once asked. *No, it isn't the Scripture*, Jakob replied. No one else showed any further interest. He had brought a Bible along as well, but never picked it up.

Jakob didn't read all that attentively, to be honest. Rather, he allowed his thoughts to drift while staring at the pages, the book serving as a wall that kept others from clawing their way into his mind. He enjoyed solitude in every sense: whereas the others tended to flee the train car as fast as they could at any station with a longer stopover, relishing even brief moments outside its oppressive walls, Jakob would always leave last and occasionally not even step out onto the platform. It was unbounded openness where he felt uncomfortable. Even as a child when his middle brother Johannes taught their sister Jenny the names of the constellations glittering in the August sky, Jakob was left feeling indifferent—the cosmos of enclosed

spaces fascinated him much more. The only infinity that he recognized was the type that turned in upon itself and, therefore, had room to stand alongside all the other infinities.

So, he felt right at home on a train. Minus the cursed joggling. He couldn't even shake the feeling outside on a platform—the rhythm had seeped so deep into his bones that the world wouldn't stand still.

Later, half-asleep, he heard the racket the others made when returning from the city. It sounded like they were in high spirits, most of all from a wild brawl that left Krayevsky's face battered and broken. Krayevsky himself seemed the most euphoric. Jakob fell back to sleep, waking only to the click-clack of train wheels and the forest's return outside the windows. His eyes were encrusted shut; the bright sunlight filled them with pain. He sat up in his bunk and saw the others were already awake. Like every morning, the first thing Jakob did was wind his pocket watch. Solomyatin leered and appeared ready to make some comment (Jakob's watch was a perennial target of his ridicule), but didn't. The device was no mere fashion accessory: Jakob couldn't just gallivant around the world without knowing the time, could he? Right now, for example, it was already past nine. The Greek was shaving; Krayevsky, his head bandaged, was making a sandwich; Sviridov was trying to exercise as well or as poorly as one could on a moving train. Only Yeroshin was still snoring away with inebriated force, which was to be expected, seeing as how he knew no limits when carousing.

Solomyatin had procured not only several bottles of decent-enough French cognac in Verkhneudinsk, but a whole netful of fresh lemons. *What do you lot reckon, then? you can get anything from that town if you know where to ask.*

— Lemons? Jakob asked incredulously. — Why?

— The Emperor himself has this custom, Solomyatin explained importantly. — Papa Tsar likes to start his day with a little drop of cognac, which the Mrs. Emperor doesn't much approve of (we all know what those women are like), so His Papa's Majesty

has his morning booze poured into this this little teapot as if it's tea—can't tell the difference by color. And then they sprinkle a little powdered sugar on lemon slices. And whatever suits Papa Tsar should suit his loyal servants, right?

Solomyatin uncorked a bottle.

The Greek frowned, but shrugged and allowed Solomyatin to pour him a glass as well. Krayevsky nodded before he was even asked. Only Sviridov plucked his glass away before a splash of the brown liquid could be added, no matter that it'd only result in ridicule—yet another reminder to all that he wasn't like the rest of them. Solomyatin had already sliced up a lemon.

— Alright, men! he crowed, lifting the elbow of the arm holding the glass with hussaric flair. — To the Emperor's health! May he have many more lovely mornings—and the same to us!

Solomyatin finished his drink in a single gulp and dealt demanding stares to each of the men, one by one. The Greek had only taken the tiniest sip, and as Solomyatin hadn't the guts to make fun of him, he left the others alone as well.

The Greek's real name was Georgakopulu. Jakob had jotted it down somewhere when they met because names like those never stick at first, but as no one else referred to him as anything other than "the Greek", he wasn't about to make himself a goody two shoes. The Greek had been coupled with them in Moscow and was everybody's boss on paper because he, unlike the others, simple field surgeons, had been trained at the Imperial Military Medical Academy in St. Petersburg and was a genuine, albeit newly graduated, army doctor with an officer's salary and all. Thus, continuing to eschew the man's name was indeed better; otherwise, he really would start regarding himself as a step above the rest.

— A little drink in the morning and boom, you've got the rest of the day off, Krayevsky declared euphorically. He'd also quickly emptied his glass and was waiting for Solomyatin to refill it, but the latter held the bottle firmly and made no move to offer more.

Although Jakob had only taken a tiny sip, he could already feel the cognac coursing through his veins; the languorous

bliss creeping into his muscles and postponing every more urgent task. Indeed, there was no difference between morning and evening on the train: it was all one monotone joggling, asleep and awake. He didn't care for a lemon, but did want one of Krayevsky's sandwiches. Although the bread was slightly stale, it was sliced thick and topped by a fresh, juicy cut of salted meat with a strip of fat. It was also, apparently, from the city.

True, it could be worse, and was sometimes actually quite serene to simply joggle along to meet your fate, as Solomyatin had the habit of saying. Perceiving your existence at every moment as a temporary balance of the chemical elements that composed your body, as Jakob had learned to see people during his studies. Mildly hungover in the morning, i.e. in his present condition, though naturally not during his schooling, and more alert after drinking coffee, edgy when hungry, winded after their mandatory morning jog on the grounds of the Brest Fortress in any weather, wearing boots and an undershirt, the tang of blood on his tongue, following the wall of the Volyn bridgehead to one crossing, through the Citadel to the Kobryn bridgehead crossing, completing one small circle, and returning via the same route—how could one possibly believe that each and every one of those states didn't make him a different person? And how was he himself perpetually the very same Jakob in all of them? So, even if there really was some kind of enduring and unchanging pattern, a tiny finite infinity keeping this Jakob as *he was now tell me again it's God-willing* together, then in every situation *I won't* it had to bend a little in the direction of where the situation was bending it, correct? And on a physical level, it was far from just the bodily chemistry, but the pain and the fear and the pleasure, too (recognizing those was easy), or even inner shifts precipitated by mathematics or logic or music, which could only comprise certain chemical compounds, reactions, chains of causes and effects that could all be written in formulas. And yet, everything else he could remember had to be stored within that very same pattern somehow: Podgorely's dry lectures on

the various types of casts and bandages, Yevdokimov's tirades, Father Pimen's sermons, and private docent Pfeifenberger's Latin. Not to mention his grandmother's fairy tales and his father's stories of Estonians' ancient fight for freedom along with Jesus somewhere beneath them all.

On the top bunk, Yeroshin's eyes fluttered open at the aroma of cognac.

— Wake up! he roared to himself. — On your feet!

Groaning, he pushed his great frame to a sitting position and leapt down to the floor.

— Atten-TION! he barked at the other men, saluting and in formal cadence.

— Oh, shut up, Yeroshin, Krayevsky said with a chuckle. — As if you haven't got a headache like the rest of us.

— Yessir, it's killing me, Yeroshin said with a nod and sat down next to the Pole. He reached for a glass of cognac, which Solomyatin immediately handed to him. Krayevsky was still staring expectantly at Solomyatin, who still ignored him. The Greek clinked glasses with Yeroshin and finished his own.

— Maybe one more round? he suggested to Solomyatin. — And then we give it a rest for now? Aren't we supposed to transfer to another train in Chita?

— We've got several hours until then, Krayevsky reckoned.

Yeroshin emitted a long and sonorous belch.

— Exactly, the Greek agreed. — Enough time to drink ourselves into such a state that we don't recognize our face in the mirror.

The tight and rather grimy collar of Jakob's uniform shirt had chafed his neck a painful red, and his arms and legs felt a little swollen after their ten-or-so days spent on the train. Though he'd been no beanpole before the trip, to be fair. He stood up and stretched for a moment, then edged between the bunks and stepped out into the corridor, looking around.

The faces at the opposite end of the train car had changed overnight. In place of the group that'd been sitting and playing cards since Omsk was now a polite merchant family seated between

the bunks (strange that they were in third class): a long-bearded father, a hunched-over mother, and two children—a boy in a high-school uniform and a girl with long braids who looked a couple years younger. The latter now gaped at Jakob as if she'd never seen such a person in her life. Maybe she hadn't. But no matter the family's destination, she was riding to meet her fate just as they were. I hope they get off in Chita, Jakob thought, or at least move to another car.

Actually, he realized, he'd prefer to be travelling anywhere else, too—even to wherever the merchant family was going. But what can you do?

The fact that he was right here, right now, was naturally the end result of a very long, sturdy chain of inevitable and chance events. Jakob could vividly remember the moment that sequence had begun to inexorably unfurl, and it truly was a fluke. Long ago, when he was still a student at a rural primary school, in his last year and a new schoolhouse, he, who was never a rule-breaker, found himself summoned to the teacher's office for his very first "talk". Students were not allowed to enter without invitation, not like in their old schoolhouse where kids darted in and out willy-nilly. Jakob was to give his account of a fight that he'd tried to break apart and had ended with not only one party's broken nose (Jakob himself had taken quite a punch, too), but a broken globe that previously stood on the teacher's desk. Although he possessed a clear overview of the course of the scuffle and the guilt of those involved, what he saw when he entered the office astounded him so tremendously that his throat dried up and he couldn't utter a single word.

As one would expect, the office was filled with piles of books and other documents heaped on the teacher's bulky, large-drawered desk, but also something else: shallow glass-topped cases, some stacked neatly by the wall, others leaned against the desk, and a few hung on the wall, allowing Jakob to see their contents—countless butterflies pinned to the bottoms, ranging from ordinary pale insects to majestic creatures in splendid

colors, the likes of which he'd never observed flapping through their local meadows. The only explanation was that they'd come from somewhere else. But even more than their beauty, Jakob was spellbound by the spaces left between the orderly rows in some of the cases, leading to the sole conclusion *because it could be no other way* that there was a system in place—that every butterfly was exactly where it should be within the great, all-encompassing arrangement of things, and if any space was empty, then it was because the right butterfly for that void hadn't been caught yet, though it did exist and was living its one and only day—its path simply hadn't intersected with that of the collector yet. And if the butterfly's day should end before they met, then no matter, for somewhere, another identical creature would begin its own the following day, and that exact space was meant for it.

Jakob strove to cling to thoughts about the fight, but hearing his own voice, he knew that he himself wouldn't believe a single word of it. The teacher listened in silence. Opened before him on the desk was a large, thick book with colorful pictures of butterflies like those in the cases. They were difficult to discern, however, because the glossy paper was covered by another page—delicate, crinkling, and translucent—that the teacher had allowed to slip from his fingers the moment that Jakob walked in.

— Alright, the teacher said. — You may leave.

He turned his back on the boy, but Jakob remained riveted in place, thoughts flashing through his brain like lightning in a night sky, knowing that if he didn't ask a certain question right now, then he'd never forgive himself for it.

— Sir… Would you please explain that infinity-thing to me again?

Translated by ADAM CULLEN

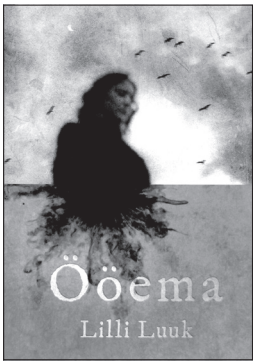


LILLI LUUK
(1976)

NIGHT MOTHER

Stories that are not told, and questions that have no right answers, emerge from the vast marshland after a long-hidden memento is found. Piece by piece, a picture is formed about the impossible choices of women and men in a post-World War II Estonian village. You can smell the early-morning bog and feel the fear and thirst for life of the characters lost in that landscape.

Translations: Hungarian



Lilli Luuk
ÖÖEMA
Saadjärve kunstikeskus
2024, 232 p.

[pp 7—9]

THE SPIRITS' TRAIL

If you visit a bog, be sure not to tread on the spirits' trail. The bog is home to more than you can imagine, and you are merely a guest here, transient. Black cranes, gray cranes, storks that fly low over the fields in the evening and land at the edge of the forest, those whose cries you've heard when the mist spreads, the raised bog is their home. It's also home to the wood grouse, clad in lustrous beetle-black feathers, the clapping of his wings fills the sparse pine grove in spring and on the breast of his companion is a red stain the hue of dried blood. Right here on the bog's brink, on the

lip of the mire, is where all such galliformes gather, many in this place have watched the black grouse's mating game, have seen the wedding dance with their own eyes, have kept quiet, breath caught in her young chest, ribs rising and falling. Here, nearby, in a clump of scattered spruce, a gray cobweb catches in her dark eyelashes, bits of leaves and twigs hang from her loose curls, the back of her coat is mossy, soil and one muddy birch leaf cling to the toes of her shoes. Her stockings are damp, her undershirt wrinkled, she hasn't noticed to pull it straight beneath her skirt, and her hand perspires in the young man's hot palm. The grouse cocks coo and spar, not that the clashes are entirely earnest, a bluish glint on their feathers, the brown striped hens cluck and crow in the low dried grass on the edge of the clearing. The weaker keep to the fringes, staying timidly or glumly silent at a distance. Constantly, the young man's gaze drifts from the courting back to his sweetheart, he squeezes her slender white fist in his long fingers, a little too tightly by accident, it's a majestic spectacle that he has to offer, presented in a raucous thicket saturated in wonderful scents, far on the rim of an ancient bog, on one of those early spring mornings when everything still lies ahead.

Everything always still lies ahead.

Who worded it that way? Yes, there's life galore in the bog! And there is death in the bog. On the opposite edge, in another parish (though not in another county, which this does extend to for kilometer upon kilometer), a golden eagle is dismantling the day's first quarry, cocking its head and listening, blood streaming down its hooked beak. It spreads its powerful wings, stretches them in the air, rises high above the bog and the forest just for that moment to observe the two strolling along the eanach*, two tiny dots crossing the barren expanse. Swooping low once again, the bird measures its own size, the width of its wingspan on the smooth mirror of a wide bog pond, its line of flight remains unnoticed by the amblers, and it soon sinks its*

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* A narrow path through a bog (Irish). See Robert MacFarlane's Landmarks, p. 50.

talons into the hard branch of its nesting tree on a drier patch of the bog, upon a rise, king of its own island.

Why don't they walk along the edge, those foolish little creatures?! Though the bog is indeed immense, nature's tremendous ballroom and dance floor, the eagle's eye alone capable of spying them so well that the watcher remains concealed, any other would have to stride out into the unshielded expanse and place a target upon themselves, behind the stunted branches of a crouching pine, between the stooping mounds—only then would they reach and see.

And yes, it is spring! White frost is crumbling and collapsing, disappearing into the ground, waking the soil and its inhabitants, the bog is donning colors and emitting scents, nature is budding, pushing, unfurling, opening itself in every tone, and it is the human eye, otherwise so pitiful in physical ability, that can discern the bounty of these colors. Just as her eye will find that bloody wound, the bright spot in the neatly preened breast feathers of every grouse hen. Still, fear also melts in the dances of spring, if only temporarily. Everyone longs to stride onto a dance floor at least once in her lifetime, straight to the center of the ballroom, head held high, no matter if every gaze is trained upon her, no matter if she's sized up as prey, it is her life, her spring, all are invited to Gaia's great ball. It is her time to play and cavort as if there is no tomorrow, was her undershirt inside out or was it not, who can really remember such details, can swear to them, can place every faith in them.

The bog knows no time, the quagmire no clock. A century backwards or forwards, eight or eighty, the bog is still the same. What changes are the colors and lights, the air above the wetland flora, but not the ancient landscape itself, the bottomless bog pools and paths with no beginning and no end, those visible and those hidden, everything here exists permanently. If you think there is no path, then look again. Perhaps it's only that you cannot see it, perhaps eyes alone aren't enough. The bog does not reveal anything voluntarily, you must want to seek it, must be able to accept what you find.

[pp 28—33]

Standing beneath a tree, I was rolling a heavy nail back and forth between my fingertips when the whooping of birds and clapping of wings suddenly came from above—cranes, from the sound of it. Shouldn't they already be heading south? I looked up to see two gray-winged cranes fly overhead. Just then, I noticed that embedded in the same thick, reddish trunk of the pine I was leaning against were nails identical to the one that I had warmed in my palm, running all the way to the uppermost branches.

Under Aunt Hinge's direction, she and I had walked for maybe two or three hours—it was still bright afternoon when our legs, rubbery from weariness, touched firm ground again, in any case. We'd doubtless taken many unnecessary steps and detours but, strangely, she still managed to keep us from getting grievously lost by following markers known only to her. I caught myself thinking that maybe it was because Mom wasn't with us. Whenever Mom and I walked through the woods, I kept my eyes on the ground and never considered our orientation; perhaps it was the same for Hinge. Now, she had an opportunity to revive her memory, her forgotten knowledge, to independently engage her sense of direction, to lead. Occasionally, she would stop, slightly winded, frown, and choose a new course. When walking between the depressions and mounds suddenly became much easier, Hinge said, "We're on the eanach now. It's like a path—from here, we only need to go straight." We walked at a brisk

pace along a ridge that was nearly imperceptible to the eye but evident beneath our feet, hope grew and, at least for me, somewhat eclipsed the exhaustion while helping to put the gnawing hunger from my mind. The trees rose taller, blackberry stalks appeared in the low-lying vegetation, their leaves now brownish, a lone raven cawed from a lofty treetop, announcing our approach to the island folk. I'd have never known to call it an island—the bog simply turned to forest, the miry ground became firmer, but Hinge was energized. Mom was nowhere to be seen amid the trees. We paused in a clearing and my attention was drawn to a grassy hillock, before which was a small depression and lengths of rotting boards partially reclaimed by the earth. Hinge didn't say anything but simply plopped down on a semi-rotten stump that was black, as if charred, and lit a cigarette. I was dumbfounded. I'd thought she quit smoking, hadn't seen her light one cigarette either yesterday or today, hadn't even asked if she was carrying matches, but what do you know—she'd brought cigarettes along to the bog! Red Marlboros, those were pricey. You could get anything these days, if you had the money. Before, there was money but nothing to buy. "Why did we have to get old before this came around?" Those were Hinge's words to Mom. I couldn't recall Mom having ever discussed those topics like that, she was indifferent to the incessant inflow of gaudy abundance, just as she'd never been excited by the deficit fabrics or Czech shoes that Hinge would occasionally get from a friend who worked as a senior saleswoman at the department store, then exchange them for something like fresh meat from Tõnis. The reek of Hinge's smoke and pack of cigarettes reminded me of that, for some reason.

Hinge wanted to look around, but I felt my legs refused to cross bog mounds anymore. I leaned back against the pine trunk as Hinge disappeared among the trees. For a moment, I wondered what would happen if she got lost, too, but I was already too exhausted to start worrying. I burrowed my fingers into the dry moss and that was when they discovered the thick nail. Hinge was right—someone had been here before us. A person.

Hinge's boxy figure reemerged between the reddish trunks, having gone off looking for signs of Mom or to take a pee, I watched as she approached somewhat unsteadily, navigating the mounds, her yellow coat like a traffic light for the hesitant, neither permitting nor forbidding. The vivid spot suddenly vanished and devils howled beneath the trees. I stood; it was strange to hear pine needles pattering off me. I was rather famished; hunger is said to sharpen the senses. I called out Hinge's name.

"I fell," said the yellow bundle, struggling up from the lingonberry bushes. "Tripped on a branch."

I walked towards her. The last thing I needed was to have to start hauling Hinge out of the woods. I wouldn't even have the strength to drag her—she'd gotten plumper over the last few years after moving back to the city. I supported her under the shoulder, she tugged her muddy boot loose and yanked her elbow from my grasp. Something glinted where her boot had disturbed the soil and withered lingonberry leaves.

"Can you walk?" I asked, but she was already stepping away to brush dirt off the knees of her overalls.

"That's no branch," I said, crouching.

"What is it then, a root?"

"Something metal."

The object was even colder to the touch than the soil. My stomach suddenly churned—what if it was a munition or something like that? When I was a child, people still talked about cases of boys coming across undetonated grenades or tossing munitions into a bonfire, some lost their fingers or went blind. Out in the bog with Hinge, I'd have no chance of survival—if we weren't blown to bits immediately, then I'd certainly run dry of blood right here on the moss. Even so, I dispelled the thoughts and cautiously wiped damp detritus from the discovery. A fingernail scraped the surface, and goosebumps rose on my arms.

"It's some kind of a handle."

Now, I was down on my hands and knees, scraping the soil away. It was the lid of a container. The earth clutched its treasure

tightly; it had apparently been there for a very long time. Rust was crusted around the edges, I jiggled it, dirt squeaked between metal until the grating object, digging painfully into my fingers, came free, propelling me backwards and revealing a dark metallic cavern.

"Huh, a milk churn," Hinge said, leaning over my discovery. It was a familiar receptacle. Back when Grandma had a cow, she'd carry a couple containers like it to a raised platform by the road and I'd run along with her. I liked sitting on the milk stand—often, I'd stay kicking my legs back and forth on the gray-weathered, sun-warmed boards until the milk truck appeared from a cloud of dust as it rounded the bend. To a six-year-old, it was the day's main event. Even later when I was in school, Uku and I would occasionally sit and count the vehicles that passed. There weren't many over the course of a day, or at least in the few hours that two kids sat there swinging their legs and tossing chewed apple cores over their shoulders into a rye field. The bus passed once a day, sometimes the old stable hand Heiki would ride by on his horse-drawn wagon, the rust-colored mare named Liida may have been older than us, but Heiki took her home from the collective farm's stable because the elderly creature was destined for a fox farm otherwise. Sometimes he'd invite us to hop on, too, we'd bounce in the back for a little while, the pleasant scent of hay and livestock filled our nostrils, though we couldn't ride along for very long, of course, as we had to be able to run back home and Uku had a slightly longer distance to go than I did.

I stuck my hand into the cavity, plunging into the cold abyss, my fingers brushed soft paper, rough string, a bundle of some kind. I didn't remove it immediately but felt around inside the milk churn first. At the bottom I felt fabric, smooth and cool, tiny chilly buttons sewn to it like glass beads, probably an item of clothing, more paper, a book, books. Without me asking, Hinge spread her rain poncho over the moss, and I began pulling my finds out one by one. Books, all old-fashioned and soft-covered,

poetry collections, a few of the names familiar from high school, Talvik, Under... More books, a thick notebook with black wax-paper covers, almost entirely filled with slightly slanted script, photographs wrapped in paper, a white silk blouse... I'd forgotten my rumbling stomach and concern and fear for my mother, suddenly everything seemed to have a purpose, how we'd foolishly lost our way, the wolves, the thick nails in the tree trunk, even the fact that Gunnar would never come to get me anywhere again.

"I know that woman!"

One after another, Hinge lifted the photographs that were laid out on the rustling rain poncho up to her face and then drew them back; cranberries were plump and red and easily caught the eye, she could spot those without the use of her glasses. I studied one photo after another, but nothing looked familiar. They were strange, some apparently staged, photographed outdoors but with undergrowth as a background, a few included a shelter seemingly built from arbitrary materials. Posting in most of the photos was a young woman about my age, judging by her looks. In one, she was wearing clothes that were a few sizes too big, as if men's clothing. It could even have been some kind of uniform, though I didn't know what uniform it was. The photographs were black and white, slightly blurred, probably not developed by the most skillful hand, though in one you could clearly tell that the woman was wearing lipstick, it even had a slightly chilling effect against the undergrowth. By then, I'd removed every item from the tin receptacle; they seemed to be someone's personal effects. A woman's. Most likely belonging to the woman in the pictures.

"Do you know her? Who is she?"

I didn't recognize anyone in the photographs. It was only natural, given that the items were all very old.

Hinge held one photo almost right up to her nose.

"Yes, I'm absolutely certain I've seen her before."

"Where?"

"I think she came to our house when I was a child. Once, I

woke up in the night and found myself alone in the bedroom, Mother wasn't there, I started calling for her and then that woman appeared in the doorway, picked me up from bed, and said she would take me to my mother. I even remember her black hair, it was let down and stroked my face and I stopped crying. I thought she was very beautiful. Her hair tickled my nose and smelled like the bog, but her clothes… her clothes smelled just like Father's clothing."

I grew even more attentive. Grandpa was almost never discussed at home, Mom couldn't remember him, and Grandma was always able to redirect the conversation.

"So, who was she?"

"I don't know. I never saw her again, or at least I don't remember any other times. I was very young back then, too; it's nothing more than a fuzzy memory. But it must have been her. Look, I think she might have even been wearing that same jacket!"

"Check and see if you know anyone else!"

I felt a buzz, almost like the thrill of the hunt.

Hinge flipped quickly through the photographs until she came to one showing a young man with his side facing the camera, standing before a pale wooden cross on a mound of dirt. Hinge held it up to her eyes for a moment before swiftly lowering it.

"Well?"

My curiosity was rising like dough, but Hinge stared straight through me, unseeing and unhearing. She swept the pictures together like a deck of cards, folded them back into the paper, and wrapped the entire treasure in the poncho.

"Let's go. It's getting dark and there's still ground to cross before we get to the barn."

I stuffed the bundle into my backpack. Just think what the bog can do to a person. Out here, I no longer recognized my own aunt anymore.

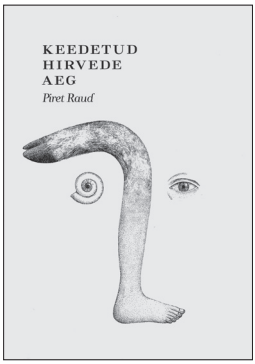
Translated by ADAM CULLEN



PIRET RAUD
(1971)

BOILED ALIVE

Artists striving to adjust to the restricted society of a totalitarian state. Who will conform and who will be shut down? A tense story about living an ordinary life in a crooked world where nothing is really as it seems.



Piret Raud
KEEDETUD HIRVEDE AEG
Tänapäev 2024, 301 p.

[pp 5—17]

Nothing compares to the joy a patient feels when their vision has been restored. The moments following the operation, when they begin to realise that their world of hazy shadows, which they had come to accept without question, has been replaced by one that is clear and bright, are worth all the struggles and doubts that I have had to face over time. Suddenly, the patient sees the finest branches in the bare silhouette of leafless trees, buds on the tips of branches, and the sky, seen through the mesh of treetops, appears bluer than ever before. She notices that the carpet of grass is made up of single blades, flower blossoms of petals, and the fuzzy coat of the bumblebee buzzing over

the flowers, of soft, delicate hair. Previously faded colours have become vibrant, as if washed clean of dust, every individual colour waiting to be discovered, different colourways waiting to be admired. And although I know that in just a few years, she will grow accustomed to her new eyes and will have forgotten this initial euphoria, it doesn't change the fact that I have helped her cross a hazy field to a world that is clear, a world, that those who haven't experienced the fog of shadows, totally take for granted.

By all accounts, I should never have become an ophthalmologist. Someone whose hands and thoughts must never falter, whose decisions have no room for error. Someone who isn't merely seeking the truth of the matter but finds it and tackles uncertainty no matter how taxing it may be. Someone who doesn't leave things unfinished, who doesn't stubbornly stomp their feet when things go wrong.

I grew up amidst artists, among people for whom the natural sciences were something second-rate. Not that the physical world failed to interest them, quite the opposite, it offered them a great deal of excitation, but they preferred instinctive perception to sober analysis. They reserved the right to see the world as they chose, to form it in their own image, and in this way create hundreds of tiny, personal worlds in which they felt at home.

I don't remember much from my early childhood, but the little that I do remember makes me believe that we were a happy family, father, mother, and tiny little me. And most likely so were all the others that lived in The House, father's colleagues, their husbands and wives, distant relatives, and dearest lovers. I recall, although only vaguely, parties at home that lasted into the wee hours, where everyone sat at a long table or stretched out on the floor, everyone talking at the same time, talking over each other, a few group excursions out to the green countryside, and the opening of a group show, where everyone was asked to come in costume. I remember the times when I was alone with father,

better, just the two of us, especially the times that he sat me in the sidecart of his motorcycle and we rode out of the city so he could paint en plein air, or photograph buildings that he feared would soon be torn down. Later, it turned out that his fears were justified: the new era wiped away houses along with gardens, changing the landscape, scattering smells, eliminating tastes. Even certain words and expressions were suddenly deemed unfit to use — they were replaced by new ones, which often didn't mean anything, and were only meant to stress the fact that the speaker wasn't stuck in the past.

Looking back, it's hard to say when exactly life for residents of The House began to change. They held onto the hope for a long time that they had some special status and would remain untouched, like flying squirrels that have been declared a protected species. After all, they were so charming and good, but above all, utterly unthreatening. Even if they sometimes liked to think of themselves as threatening, no one truly believed that they really could be. Charming, good, and harmless — that's how they saw themselves.

Unlike much else that occurred at that time, what befell them didn't happen suddenly; rather, it crept up slowly and perniciously, and the realisation came only after hesitation, mistrust, and fear had taken over The House entirely. They hadn't shared their worries, instead each of them had struggled in isolation, fighting unequal battles predestined for defeat, so there was nothing surprising about what followed. One after another, their ideas left them, feelings disappeared, or to be more specific, they didn't leave or disappear; rather, they became inaccessible. How was it even possible to recapture them when there were no means to do so? For one thought to grow from another, for a mood to develop from a vague flicker of emotion, for separate blotches of observation to become a generalisation, something was needed that had been taken from them — ruthlessly and without warning. They

were bewildered, even those who had proudly distanced themselves from the concept of creativity and were now resigned to being artisans.

This new situation affected the residents in different ways. Some stopped trying and became absorbed with social life; they began to drink even more than they previously had, and they began to go downhill fast. Others pretended that nothing had changed and continued with their activities, adjusting their gaze to what was expected in a given setting, thus dissolving into dull banality. And then there were those who found a new occupation: the architect Anderson became the household manager, the Saars, both art scholars, went to work at the geology institute archives, the sculptor Kõrv became a taxidermist. The only one that appeared to be unaffected by the changes was Voldemar Verlin, but he didn't count.

Father was perhaps one of the last to capitulate. He sat with stubborn determination at the table in the atelier, tossing pencils and crumpling paper. Full of hope at first, because he was accustomed to temporary setbacks, but the more time passed, the more despondent he became.

The tensions weren't confined to the studio, but seeped through the closed door and permeated the entire apartment, filling it with a restless anxiety. Mother's attempts to morally support Father and to restore his self-confidence only served to add to his distress, until his distress became a rage that he most unfairly poured out on us. Mother would have perhaps tolerated his bursts of anger had they cleared the air, but as this didn't happen, even she could no longer remain self-effacing. Discontent became the constant companion of our lives, while treasured memories that once connected us and hopes for the future became more and more feeble until they faded away entirely. One by one, we were forsaken by tenderness, sensitivity, empathy, and forgiveness. As if all the good was being sucked out from a hole in the protective dome that towered over us, and more broadly over the entire House. This hole could not be repaired, the same way that it was

not possible to stand up to the vacuum forces pulling at Father. So, it came as no great surprise when, in the end, Father was sucked out through the hole — into silence, numbness, and apathy.

Life as we knew it had come to an end. The world was not the same.

AIR BLADDER

1.

When the girls at school would ask me what my favourite colour was, so they could write it down in the notebook where they recorded everyone's preferences, I replied — white. Often, they would suggest that I choose something else, since there were those who didn't consider white to be a colour, but I always remained true to myself. I really and truly liked white; you could outright say that I felt a closeness to white. To white and to winter. Every year, the arrival of snow struck me like a revelation, how the snow would enlarge the landscape, making it appear broader and more expansive, and in the middle of it all, I would become smaller, perhaps even unassuming, but certainly not insignificant.

Snow soothed me. The quietude and the softness of snow was soothing, but still most of all the whiteness in all its undertones, which depending on the light and the weather could be quite manifold: the bluish white of frosty twilight, the greyish white of melting snow, the blinding whiteness of February sun, and the unassertive shimmer of lamplight at night. And then there were the shadows, a great shadow inside a greater white, and inside the white shadow, a shadow that in turn contained the next shadow. These shadows weren't at all gloomy or threatening as shadows can sometimes be, instead, they were gentle, just like the shade a tree provides from the blazing sun on a hot summer day.

I was on my way home from school. My last class had been cancelled, and I was not in a hurry to get home. Taking my time, I walked along the familiar street observing the surroundings all done up with the first snow; this wasn't even real snow, rather a watery sleet that melted away as soon as it touched the ground. Still, it had the power to move me. The smell of approaching winter brought me joy, as did the leafless trees whose trunks had been rendered velvety black by the dampness, and my footprints on the slushy walkway; I stopped and looked back to see if the pattern on the soles of my boots was visible. In some places it was.

Large, wet snowflakes fell onto my face, some even went into my eyes because the wind was against me. I left the main road to get away from the wind. Instead of smooth asphalt, I was now walking along pavement stones, assiduously taking long strides, so as not to step on the cracks. I've had this silly habit since kindergarten, a habit I have, with varying degrees of success, struggled to break. Like now, as soon as I caught myself avoiding the cracks, I recovered my composure and forced myself to walk exactly how my feet saw fit.

There, where the road branches into three, was a billboard with photos of unknown missing people. Even it hadn't been left untouched by the wet snow. On the upper wooden frame of the board, a sizeable white line had collected, as if the wet snowflakes sticking to the glass couldn't decide whether to melt and trickle down to the ground or to hold onto the smooth glass.

I stopped in front of the billboard. I did this every time I happened by chance to come this way. Or maybe it wasn't always by chance? Did I sometimes make a little deviation on purpose, and instead of the most direct route, chose this longer one, just to have a reason to stop in front of this billboard and to feel a bit skittish?

I hesitated for a moment and thought about whether I should wipe the wet snow off the glass, but decided not to interfere. I

could still make out the faces on the photos that stared back at me through the wet glass without wiping the glass clean. They were the faces of strangers, even if they were a tad familiar, from the previous times. The photos were black and white and arranged in a regular manner relative to each other, which made the people all look alike, but I had learned to tell them apart by the tiny details, which were easier to remember than the names under the photographs. Over-plucked eyebrows, bangs cut at an angle, a jet black mouth. A wide tie, a cat-shaped brooch. More often than not, a new face would have been added since the last time, and an old one taken down, but you couldn't conclude that because their photo had been taken down, all was well with that person. It was more likely that their time to be posted on the billboard was up, and they were now written off forever.

I was frightened of this billboard. I was frightened of the photos. They were so formal and soulless. I was frightened of the stories behind the faces. I was frightened that, some day, I could find the photo of someone very special to me beneath the glass. Like Father. Especially Father.

My father was indeed missing, but in a different way than the billboard people. He was still there, perhaps more than ever before, because after what happened, he never left home, he was an empty shell, a bag of skin full of viscera and bones, wandering from room to room. Everything that had once consumed him, everything that had made him my father was gone, or as I liked to think, paused. Father lived in a world somewhere between existence and non-existence, and even though this situation has lasted for years, I hoped and believed that one fine day he would return to existence. Back to us, back to his paintings, his brushes and cameras.

But of course, there was always the possibility that he would fall to the other side — behind the glass of the billboard and be lost forever.

I felt cold at the thought of finality which didn't come from the chilly day; it came from inside me. A shiver ran through my entire body and came to a stop at my fingertips, which were curled inside my woollen mittens. I shoved my fists into the bottom of my pockets and rubbed them against my sides until they became warm.

I checked and double-checked the photos posted on the billboard. There were exactly forty-nine of them. Seven faces in seven rows, not one of them smiling. I forced the corners of my own mouth up so as not to be like them. The smile increased the distance between me and them, keeping them at arm's length.

The man wearing a plaid shirt and glasses was no longer there. I clearly remember the man's thick, black, owl-like glasses. Also, his sad gaze made him look like the people I was used to seeing. He could easily have been any one of our neighbours or family acquaintances. In his place was another man with a more spirited disposition, wearing a jacket and a fashionable turtleneck sweater. It could just as well have been a woman, because the name below the photo was that of a woman. Otherwise, the rest of the billboard-women were all the same. They all wore their short hair the same way, and their dresses were outdated and not very pretty. No one from The House was here, which lightened my spirit.

I turned my head away so as not to look at the photos a third time and walked to the other side of the street. It felt too risky to stand in front of the billboard for too long. I was afraid that I would attract the lost people behind the glass, that they would become attached to me and follow me everywhere. Allow me to lead them somewhere they shouldn't go. Better to be careful.

Meanwhile, the heavy sleet had turned to snow. Large snowflakes floated all around me, very slowly and gently, they grazed my cheeks and nose and stuck to my scarf that Mother had knitted, which had come loose from around my neck. I shook the

scarf clean and tucked it back into the collar of my coat. I took one last glance over my shoulder at the billboard. It had become hidden behind a curtain of snow and was barely visible. Just in case, I quickened my steps.

Translated by TIINA OTEMA



URMAS VADI
(1977)

THE OTHER SIDE OF THE MOON

A psychological drama on the complicated relationship between a domineering mother and her narrating son. The coming-of-age tale is simultaneously an account of that generation's experiences after the end of Soviet occupation in Estonia – the wild 1990s. Written with endearing humor, it portrays decisive decades through the lives of ordinary people.

Translations: Finnish



Urmas Vadi
KUU TEINE POOL
Kolm Tarka 2023, 384 p.

A SHIFTING MIND

Hidden within all of us are traces of relics, passed down generation after generation, something only members of our own family can truly value. We all have a history, come from somewhere, and carry baggage and memories, whether we want to or not. Someone has an old grandfather clock in the corner of the room, which measures each passing minute and chimes on the hour as if to say, "This hour is now over; how have you used it?" Someone has a gold-framed mirror hanging on the wall in which you only recognise yourself through memory. A former classmate of mine had a small organ in his home that produced sounds not just from a bygone era but from the

other side. We would shudder in horror but couldn't stop working the pedals until the old man downstairs rapped on the ceiling with a broom handle.

An age-old saying in our family, often repeated by my mother, was:

"There have never been swindlers, smokers, or lunatics in our family!"

These were the three iron-clad pillars, like three whales, on which our world was balanced and to which Mother turned for support when she lost her footing or when her world turned dark. When she had a final point to make, when she was convinced she was right, when she began to run out of arguments, when the debate had become meaningless and purposeless, you knew the line was coming that would put an end to all discussion. Not one of us dared talk back once this line was spoken, not me, not my sister, nor my father, lest we come under suspicion of being a swindler, a smoker, or a lunatic. None of us wanted that. Who would?

No one remembered who first uttered this statement. Was it our grandmother who lived in town, who had heard it from her mother, who had heard it from hers? Was this phrase modulated and modified over time to fit the situation? At any rate, no one doubted its weight and significance! As a child, during the murky soviet era, many things remained unclear and confusing, my sister Kerli and I didn't understand the workings and complexities of the world. However, this phrase was something that we understood with certainty. Father would return from a weekend with our out-of-town grandmother bringing fleas, not to mention a nervous and foul mood. Along with the fleas, mean-spirited words bounced around our apartment and could be heard through the closed kitchen door. Sometimes, it helps to raise your voice to point out how bad habits and inferior genes made their way into the family. And finally, Mother would hiss her legendary line. By nightfall, the fleas were the least of our worries, they were mere background dancers. Still, they did not

let us forget their presence and ate away at us relentlessly. For weeks, Kerli and I were covered in red welts and dared not remove our clothes during gym class. Were these fleas trying to tell us something? Like, if you people can't even deal with us, how do you get along with each other, with your complex nervous systems, your brains, and your emotions? Are you sure you wouldn't rather be fleas? Life would be a lot less complicated. Why not come over to our side?

Once, I found an open pack of cigarettes on the ground. My heart began to race, I looked all around to see if anyone was watching me. The coast was clear, so I picked up the cigarettes, put them into my pocket, and walked home as if carrying the spoils of war. On one hand, I felt all-powerful and triumphant. Not one person I passed had any idea what I had in my pocket. On the other hand, the cigarettes felt dirty and disgusting. I showed the pack to Kerli; she, too, had conflicted feelings and didn't dare touch it. I tried to light a cigarette behind the neighbour's garage, but I wasn't successful. In the end we didn't even manage a single drag, not a single puff. We debated over what to do for a long time and finally decided to bury the cigarettes in the garden. We snuck out under cover of darkness, and with an aluminium tablespoon, we dug a small hole between the dill stalks, put the cigarette package inside, and ran home. I felt as though the cigarettes would someday sprout from the ground and get me!

A few days later, I couldn't explain to my father why I had a spoon in my jacket pocket covered with dirt. As usual in cases like this, when Father didn't know what to do, he called Mother, who always knew what to do. She knew how to carry out an interrogation. Kerli broke down and exclaimed:

"It's all Tom's fault..."

When every last detail had been laid bare, the culprits and the severity of the crime exposed, Mother signalled from the corner of her eye that it was time. Unbuckling and removing his belt from his trousers, Father beat me feebly with one hand while holding onto his pants with the other so they wouldn't drop to

the ground. Sometimes, he would utter an apology that only I could hear:

"Mother insisted." I yelled and screamed, everyone cried, but we had to become accountable adults someday, somehow. No one was certain whether or not this would actually happen. I wasn't angry with Kerli, I would have spilled the beans just as she had done because to continue to resist and not confess would have meant a beating for both of us, not just a light one, but a proper lashing. Our screams would be heard by the neighbours who would come to see what was going on, to see what all the yelling was about, although no one ever really came because beatings were common in those days. What one did with one's own children, behind the thin walls of one's apartment, was no one else's business. Is the real reason for insulating and heating homes today so that the screams can't be heard? In this day and age, beatings must be done silently and in secret because now people are ready to actively intervene. But you couldn't just get away without a beating, words had to be backed up with action! And so it was this time. Even though she had ratted on me and only I got belted, I knew Kerli was also suffering, I even felt sorry for her, and she for me, Father for himself, and Mother for all of us. This is how we rolled; we needed one another, and we loved one another. And even though I spent my entire childhood wishing that my brother Timo, who died at birth, was still alive, wishing that I had someone other than Kerli in whom I could confide at times like this, when I was put through the wringer, I would think that it's just as well that he isn't here.

Afterwards, as I stroked Mother's hair, I pleaded with her not to cry anymore, but tears continued to flow from her eyes like water from Grandmother's kitchen faucet, which was old and couldn't be turned off completely. It trickled continuously, drops plinking noisily onto the enamel sink. Finally, Mother sighed deeply and said:

"This is how you will send me to my grave." She didn't use this line often, and it gripped my soul like a vice. I knew she

had a weak heart, as did her own mother. It was hereditary on Mother's side of the family. We all knew that her heart was enlarged and could stop beating at any time if her strength gave out. Grandmother would joke and say:

"We are big-hearted women!" I didn't see anything funny in this. And neither did Mother. She warned me and Kerli that if we didn't stop fighting with each other and continued to misbehave, her heart would stop beating sooner rather than later, and we would become mindful and serious at once. Sometimes, when Kerli and I hadn't even done anything, when everything was peaceful and calm, Mother would reach down through the opening of her dress and massage around her heart, round and round, the corner of her mouth tense. At times like this, we would freeze and wonder, is this it!?

Mother had always taken pills by the handful; the piles of pills could stuff a pillow. She spent countless hours at various clinics and pacing hospital corridors. Often, she spent weeks at a time in the hospital, where father, Kerli, and I would go to see her. She almost disappeared in her faded pyjamas. How many patients had worn them before her? How many of them had gone home, and how many had been taken by stretcher to the morgue in the basement?

In the lift, we shuddered at the thought of pushing the button to the basement level by mistake. It was unlikely that this would happen as all the buttons were white and round. Only the button to the basement was rectangular and black, like a grave. Down in that hospital basement, the pyjamas would be removed from the bodies, washed, and readied for the next patient. Were the most faded pyjamas given to those patients who were least likely to survive and the newer ones reserved for those likely to go home? I would have wanted to know, do they dress the bodies right away into the suits and dresses they would wear in the casket, or are they left to lie naked and cold on a metal table? I feared the latter and made up my mind that if Mother were ever taken down there, I would bring a blanket from home to cover her.

You could still make out the pattern on Mother's faded pyjamas, and they seemed to keep her warm. Still, she seemed dispirited and fragile and gave Kerli and me the halva we had brought for her. We broke it exactly in half, though we both felt the other got the bigger piece. Always! We called these hospital stays the "cereal times". It was the only food Father knew how to prepare.

Even though Mother spent a lot of time in the hospital and saw countless doctors, no one seemed to know what was going on with her heart. Some doctors were convinced that there was nothing wrong with her, others were surprised that she was still alive. At night, I would sneak into my parent's room to check if she was still breathing. Reassured, I could go back to my room and not worry while lying in my bed that she might be dead.

Mother would often say:

"You know I will always protect you, but you must be truthful with me. Otherwise, we will find ourselves in a sad situation where I can no longer trust you." I couldn't imagine what it would be like if she couldn't trust me. Are untrustworthy children given away to another family? Do the mother and father come to a conclusion behind the closed kitchen door that they just can't take it anymore. Let someone else have a try! Maybe they can do a better job rearing this child!

I told Mother everything. In turn, she told me about her illnesses, her work at the lab, and her spiteful coworkers who just sat around smoking, drinking coffee, and engaging in sharp-tongued gossip. She didn't trust them and generally avoided them, but not to the point of being impolite. When she felt I had gained her full trust, she would tell me about Viktor and Hugo. Mother and I were like best friends, and I'll admit I felt guilty when I ripped pages from my notebook or forged her signature, and really guilty when I confessed that it was me who wrote on the school wall, "Triinu is a whore!"

All the evidence pointed to me, including the can of green oil paint. Father swore as he tried in vain to wash and scrape the paint from the school wall:

"Why did he have to take the oil paint!"

As a result, I wasn't allowed to go on my class field trip, and I was almost sent to the youth correctional facility. Even the name, "youth correctional facility" sounded like a prison or a mortuary. Father continued to scrub away at the wall but couldn't get all the paint off. Years later, vague letters could still be made out. Mother met with the principal, where she cried and pleaded, crying seemed to come easily to her and seemed to have the desired effect on the principal. Afterwards, we stood together outside Triinu's door, looking contrite with a box of assorted chocolates and a bottle of cognac. Both were ultimately accepted, and the matter was finally put to rest. I kept my mouth closed as if my jaws were wired shut, and I didn't answer when Triinu's father asked why I had done it. I remained silent, as did Triinu, and surely her father would not have wanted to know the truth. Years later, at our graduation, he glared at me with a look that said, "You dirty swine!"

As we walked home through the slushy streets, Mother stopped suddenly and sighed deeply, she didn't like Triinu or her parents, but now that it was all over, she was relieved and said:

"You're a good boy, Tom, for telling me everything." As a consolation, she took me to Leningrad in the summer when, at the same time, my classmates were camping somewhere in Pärnu and trying to light a campfire to grill sausages, but because the rain was coming down in buckets, they had to eat the sausages cold. The hungrier ones even ate uncooked macaroni. Mother cared for me, trusted me, and did everything to make things good. When I went on a fishing trip in the fifth grade, she was so proud of me, "my son the fisherman"! Still, she put a tin of fish into the bottom of my backpack, just in case the fish weren't biting.

I was so grateful that I had a mother who kept me safe from harm and could be counted on to resolve even the most difficult situation. I always sensed that Mother was with me and had my back, even when she wasn't physically there. The thought that someday I could lose her left me gasping for breath. What will

become of me? And what about Kerli, and Father, who doesn't even know how to make coffee or iron his clothes? Would we all become smokers and liars? Or would we simply go insane? I couldn't imagine what it would be like to lose my mind. Apparently, neither could Mother; she was certain that she would never go insane, and when she died, it would be because of her heart. And I believed her, because she wasn't a liar. Neither was she a smoker, and she definitely wasn't a lunatic!

I knew very well who Mother had in mind when she spoke of lunatics. Uncle Andres. Andres was three years younger than Father, and in the beginning, when Mother and Father first met, he just seemed to be an introvert who shied away from social interaction. That something was not right in Andres's head never occurred to her. It all became apparent the night Andres appeared at our door. After that, Father always checked that the doors were locked before bed. Andres's visit had made it clear what Father's side brought to our family, a totem spirit that must be kept secret and hidden. While it's possible to distance yourself from your heritage, it's not so simple when it comes to your genes and relatives. You can't just put them into a cage like a stray dog and take them far away into the forest where they can't find their way back, or give them to an animal shelter and hope they will find a new owner, because there's always someone out there for everybody. Mother was dismayed when she became aware of Father's family secret. Why do these life forms find their way to our door and try to scratch and force their way inside?

No one quite knew the nature of Andres's madness, or maybe they did but just wouldn't say. It wasn't even known whether Andres had been different since birth or if it only became apparent over time. Mother was very concerned about these questions, but she never got any clear answers. As a child, I couldn't tell that my uncle was different in any way. He wasn't kept locked away upstairs where the dull thud of his footfalls could be heard down into the kitchen and living room, or if the door was left unlocked

for any reason, he might come charging out and set the house on fire or kill or rape someone. No. Nor did he go around wearing soiled clothes, smiling to himself in an infantile way, and running off and hiding under the table if he was asked a question, such as, how old are you. Or perhaps I didn't see any of this because he was taken away at one point and then brought back again; he would sit silently off by himself in a corner, within his own indistinct boundaries, and glare at those around him like they were traitors. Was it a dislike of the human race that forced him to remain silent? But really, what is there to say to those people who call themselves your brother or mother or other familiar names, but then one day, just when you feel that you're finally beginning to understand the world around you, they push you into a car, stash pills down your throat, and shove a needle into your vein, after which all that remains is an empty numbness, like that felt by vegetables that are brought in from the field and put into pots in the cellar.

Mother admonished Father for not telling her about Andres's madness before their marriage and before the children were born, or for that matter, afterwards. That's why, since she couldn't rely on anyone else, she decided to take matters into her own hands. She found out where Andres lived and went and stood outside his apartment door. At the time, Andres lived in an old wooden building, where either coming or going, you could hear the crunch of snails underfoot. They stared at each other in the cold entryway. Mother finally invited herself in. Andres sat in the kitchen in front of the stove, smoking and ignoring her questions. The more questions she asked, the more resolute Andres was in his silence. It was at this moment, standing in that greasy, smoke-stained kitchen, that Mother first began to have doubts about Father. Is it possible that my Aivar isn't right in the head, either? They both clam up in exactly the same way. Do they fear talking will give them away and confirm their madness? In any case, she never heard a word from Andres, who just smoked cigarette after cigarette, inhaling fervently, the kitchen turning blue

from smoke. A madman and a smoker! Seeing the futility of her mission, Mother got up and left.

But as Mother was a patient of long standing, she was acquainted with many doctors. True, not in the area of psychiatry, but she wouldn't let that intimidate her. She walked purposefully through the door of the psychiatric clinic without so much as blinking an eye, once again, a box of chocolates and a bottle of cognac in her bag. She sought out Andres's doctor, and they had a meaningful, albeit ambiguous, conversation. Dr Kivi was bound by confidentiality and could not reveal details regarding his patients and their diagnoses, only generalities. Still, Mother was determined to find out more about Andres's condition and how serious it was. She made it clear that she had not come simply out of curiosity but rather:

"I understand that ethics preclude you from revealing any personal details; I just want to be able to recognise if my husband were to develop any symptoms."

"Yes, of course," agreed the doctor, smiling.

Then Mother asked directly:

"Is this hereditary?"

"It's very possible that it is."

"Is that so?" This was the answer that she had dreaded.

"I believe there's a certain degree of emotional instability in all of us." Mother doubted this but didn't interrupt; it was better to hear everything Dr Kivi had to say. "Only under certain conditions does mental illness become apparent. Like for example, jam in a jar that is tightly sealed can last for years and not go bad."

"That's understandable, of course." Mother smiled back, but she found the doctor's jam analogy in poor taste. She was a scientist. She worked in a laboratory every day with all manner of bacteria, microbes, and moulds. It was mental illness that she didn't understand.

"How does this disease manifest itself?" Mother wanted to know. " What are the symptoms?" Instead of answering her

question, the doctor only smiled. Mother waited. She had spent a lifetime waiting for the bus, standing in queues at the store, waiting for night to pass and morning to come, waiting for love. She could wait for Dr Kivi to answer her question.

"I would say a shifting mind."

"A shifting mind?"

"Yes."

"What do you mean by shifting?"

"Shifting like marsh grasses in the wind. First blown in one direction, then the other." Dr Kivi implied that the visit was over; they both rose, and Mother thanked him and left feeling that something was gained from this visit. Back home, she pored over encyclopaedias and dictionaries but could find no reference to a shifting mind. So this visit was in vain after all. Anyone could have come up with that explanation, even a madman from the psychiatric ward. A shifting mind, indeed! She was outraged! She should have just poured the cognac down a gopher hole! At the end of the day, all she had was her own husband. After dinner, when Kerli and I had settled down in front of the TV, Mother closed the kitchen door. Even though they both knew the conversation wouldn't reveal anything new, Mother asked:

"Why did you keep this from me?"

"What?" Father replied, knowing full well what she meant. He was trying to buy some time, or maybe he just wanted to prolong his suffering.

"The thing with Andres"

"I didn't hide anything!"

"So you didn't hide anything!" Mother was doubtful whether she could ever trust this man if he kept this secret from the start. How she wished she could cut into his genetic code with a pair of scissors, then stitch it back together with a needle and thread! The result would be a big improvement! But now she was full of regret that things had gone the way they had. This was nothing like the future she had imagined as a child. And who knows, if she had known about Andres before, then...

"Then you wouldn't have married me?" demanded Father. The conversation was going nowhere. It was over. Perhaps this was Mother's goal all along, to get him to ask this question. Then, it would be her turn to give him the silent treatment. Yes, Mother was the spokesperson in our family, and she talked a lot, even though she knew how to keep her mouth shut.

In the same way I would check if Mother was still breathing, she would study Kerli and me in the daylight, looking deep into our eyes as if searching for something behind them. Kerli and I knew why she was doing this and what she was afraid of finding. The statement, there are no swindlers or smokers in our family, just doesn't have the same ring to it. That's why it was good to be able to recite the complete statement in its full force and beauty as long as possible. Strangely, this statement gave me comfort. It was like a mantra, or axis, a central point that held our family together. It was as if these words were nailed to our faux leather upholstered front door and declared: Swindlers, smokers, and lunatics, keep out! Maybe that's why we had so few visitors.

Translated by TIINA OTEMA



TAUNO VAHTER
(1978)

THE 11 ESCAPES OF MADIS JEFFERSON

A grotesque travelogue of sorts. Madis Jefferson, the protagonist of this thriller, based on true events, was born in a coastal Estonian town in the early 20th century. He is a restless soul who is constantly fleeing something: home, conscription, work, Siberia, prison camps, and insane asylums.

Translations: Finnish, German, Latvian



Tauno Vahter

MADIS JEFFERSONI
11 PÕGENEMIST

Tänapäev 2021, 256 p.

THE SECOND CONTINENTAL CONGRESS

Spring 1973

Palupera Stationmaster Lyubov Suur scanned the lumps of snow melting along the ditch and noticed a gleam of red. If the scarlet elf cups were already sprouting, then that meant she could set out into the woods to forage for morels in just a few weeks' time. Lyubov's sand lime-brick dwelling that adjoined the station wasn't spacious, but she'd cultivated an entirely unsystematic garden around it that tended to expand by several new patches each year. Although she was a fan of peonies and tended a couple of bushes in the garden, she was

practically minded as well, naturally, and would ferment and pickle everything from tomatoes to peas, from spring till late autumn. If anyone had ever tried convincing her about the health benefits of jarred peonies, then no doubt she'd have preserved them, too. Single- and three-liter glass jars were lined up in dense rows in her shed and whenever a train rumbled past from just 15 feet away, the whole shelf would jingle. Lyubov likened the heavenly sound to crystal, not to a glass recycling center like one of her friends had commented while visiting from Tartu. People tended to look down on the tiny cottages and garden patches that lined the railroads, but to her, it was a cozy existence. She had ample free time on her hands, as trains didn't pass every hour. There was still a while to wait before the Valga evening train and the Chayka Express from Minsk were scheduled to arrive, but Lyubov donned her stationmaster's cap, grabbed her striped baton, and, with customary professional pride, checked left and right to see if the crossing was clear. And what do you know—there was a bit of litter on the tracks! It would do no harm to a locomotive, of course, but since there was no place for untidiness at Lyuba's crossing, she promptly marched to collect it. Upon closer inspection, however, the "litter" turned out to be an envelope containing an odd little sheet of paper crammed with dense writing. She then spotted another about ten paces away . . . and another . . . and another. Altogether, there were eight envelopes destined for various addresses in Tallinn, and even abroad. How suspicious! Lyubov tried to decipher one, but it contained the names of so many states and agencies that she nervously stuffed it back into the envelope after reading just a few lines.

"In-ter-nat-ion-al . . ." she sounded out. How suspicious!

"Cur-ren-cy system of capitalist nations . . ." Good Lord!

"In the United States of America . . ." No, no, enough! She hurriedly stashed the envelopes away.

The very next day, Lyubov turned the stack of letters that Madis had slipped through the train car window in to a Valga KGB officer. He, in turn, sent them to the Tallinn headquarters, where they were neatly filed away in Madis's old dossier.

In mid-March, after a journey by rail that lasted several days with many stops along the way, Madis Jefferson arrived at a little unknown station. There, he was tossed into a cell before being ushered to the courtyard of a large and run-down three-story red-brick building. Although psychiatric treatment was offered in Estonia, the more eyebrow-raising and troublesome committals were usually sent to Bekhterev in Leningrad or the closed ward of Moscow's Serbsky Institute. Madis had been taken to yet a third sprawling asylum: the Chernyakhovsky Private Psychiatric Hospital in Kaliningrad Oblast. Judging by the nurses' gowns and the schedule posted on the wall (walks, procedures), one might truly believe it was a hospital, but in fact, the entire administration held military ranks and the complex itself was a former high-security prison. After the head of the ward interviewed Madis and he spent a couple days in an observation room, he was finally allowed to join the other patients. The six-man ward included an even-tempered murderer, a taciturn old Lithuanian with a skeptical stare, a rapist, and two mutterers who were constantly startled by each other's tics, ruling out peace and quiet until one of them happened to turn away or left the room. The department head was a resigned older man who scanned Madis's file and announced they would soon begin his treatment. After being released into the general population, Madis was also allowed time in the courtyard. Next to every ward was a patch of gravel and a bleak means for entertainment, such as a lone netless basketball hoop or a muddy volleyball court. Scanning the outdoor area, Madis realized the complex was guarded much better than a Siberian prison camp plopped into the middle of nowhere. Beyond the towering chain-link fence was a strip of sand and behind that, another, even taller brick wall. A guard dog, a German shepherd, lay listlessly between the two barriers.

Madis approached the fence and tried to gain its attention with a low whistle. The dog turned its head but didn't get up. Madis then produced a crust of bread he'd slipped into his pocket during breakfast, tore off a piece, and flicked it towards the lethargic canine. It appeared to sniff the air but still didn't stir. Win over a service dog with a crumb of measly bread? Ha, you idiot! At least try to pocket some sausage!

"Don't bother," a voice said from behind him. It was the quietly observational geezer from his ward. "Beyond that wall's an electric fence wrapped in barbed wire to boot. You'd have to have wings to get out of here. Domantas," he introduced himself, offering a handshake. "I could tell right from the look of you that you're neither a common criminal nor crazy."

"Madis . . . from Estonia," he replied, shaking the Lithuanian's hand.

"Ah, I see . . . there are other Estonians here, too, but the ones we've got at the moment were locked up for slightly different reasons . . . one's a pedophile, and the other's just plain nuts."

"Well, let's just say I didn't feel like partaking in Soviet hospitality any longer, but I was asked to stay a while longer."

"Uh-huh . . . I was handing out leaflets at the University of Kaunas, and I guess somebody turned me in . . . You can't do anything by force here, you know. What we need is external pressure. I've been trying to come up with a way to smuggle a letter out to be read on Voice of America, telling everybody how they're treating us."

"What sort of a letter do you think you can get out of here?! They open every envelope, and you're only allowed to write in Russian . . ."

"It'll have to be slipped to a visitor. Are you going to be having any?"

"No."

"Oh, well . . . We'll just have to find somebody else then . . . Let's talk later," the old man said with a wink, then plodded over to watch the expressionless volleyball players. The patients were

allowed to return to their wards before dinner. Madis flopped onto his bed. As he was flipping through a not-particularly-promising Russian book he'd grabbed randomly from the shelf, he was interrupted by the sound of brisk footsteps.

"Mr. President, we've been expecting you!"

Madis lowered the book and found two men staring at him. One was tall, pale, and curly-haired; the other had the same pallid skin but a hairstyle that resembled something between a failed Beatles' mop top and a monk's tonsure.

"Excuse me?" Madis asked.

"We've been expecting you, Mr. Jefferson," the taller man repeated. "We'd ask you to join us in the hallway for a moment."

Hesitantly, Madis got up and stepped out of the room. Food carts were already being wheeled around by orderlies who looked as if they had no nursing or service training but rather years and years of experience in a restricted institution.

"We've been waiting years, Mr. Jefferson, and now we can finally consider convening a Continental Congress!" the tall, ghostlike man continued.

"What do you want from me?" Madis hissed.

"But Mr. Jefferson . . . this here is Mr. Adams . . . and I am Benjamin Franklin," the man stammered as if explaining the obvious. The shorter of the two had his eyes locked on Madis and nodded incessantly with a broad, sympathetic grin on his face.

"Alright . . ."

"Word of your arrival delighted us beyond imagination! We've been waiting for years, but I knew the day would finally come! We must begin drafting our declaration of independence at once! And send word to the other states!"

"Back to your wards!" a hatchet-faced orderly barked as he pushed a cart past. The patients began returning to their rooms and, with the exception of one of the tic-men starting to howl until an orderly threatened to drag him to solitary confinement if he kept it up, nothing much else happened that evening.

The next morning, several of the "customers" were given pills.

Mouths were to be opened wide after swallowing to allow the orderlies to check if the capsules had really gone down. Others, including Madis, were called to the procedure room, which had tiled walls and six beds separated by oilcloth screens. After asking what was going on, Madis was told he was to receive treatment and just to stay calm. Two nurses and a burly orderly were present in addition to the doctor. Madis noticed the divider to his right shake, then shudder, and a spasming leg jerk through the curtains before a nurse hastily closed them again. The doctor gave her a nod. She then took a syringe from a metal tray and told Madis it would "all be over soon" as the orderly stationed himself at the foot of the bed. Then, she administered the injection. Questions and protests flooded the patient's mouth but rapidly dissipated. He felt feverish and dizzy. At lunchtime, Madis was given a glass of glucose syrup, and his mind gradually cleared. The procedure was repeated the next morning, only with a larger dose, and increased grogginess afterward. This continued for over a week to the point where his sweating and convulsions significantly worsened; he constantly lost consciousness and was even unable to drink the glucose independently anymore. He was given it as a shot instead.

When Canadian doctor Frederick Banting came up with the idea to collect insulin from dog pancreases (later full-grown cattle) and inject it into diabetic animals, it paved the way for a breakthrough in diabetes treatment. However, it also set the stage for a somewhat more troubling invention. Less than a decade later, Austrian-born asylum doctor Manfred Sakel got the notion to try insulin on schizophrenia patients. He believed that one of his test subjects appeared more lucid afterward, so he decided to try varying doses on other patients, ranging up to an amount that induced a coma. The individual would sweat profusely, suffer cramps and spasms, and, in many cases, lose consciousness. This ordeal generally lasted from one to two hours, after which glucose was administered as an antidote to restore blood sugar and bring the patient out of the coma. It was meant

as a kind of electric shock therapy and seen as an opportunity to "restart" the patient; to purge their demons and obsessions. For some, it even seemed to work. There was just one drawback to the whole theory and its unusual logic: by the 1950s, studies showed that medically, insulin comas were about as useless as placebos for real treatment and that the handful of positive cases had primarily been achieved by orchestrating sample groups for desired results. Another minor problem was that patients occasionally died of brain hemorrhages, uncontrollable spasming, and other complications in their comatose state. Nevertheless, Soviet psychiatry maintained trust in the method for decades after it was outlawed in other countries and did not balk at sending patients with "more severe cases" into more than seventy consecutive comas.

Although only a few weeks had passed, Madis could have sworn he'd been at the asylum for several bleary months. He'd been put into and brought back from a total of ten comas; he felt physically battered, and his mind was numb. The first time he was allowed to spend the day in the courtyard after the treatment had begun, he merely slumped on a bench, watching other patients play volleyball and barter for cigarettes. Inmates who performed menial chores around the hospital were given a pack of smokes a day, which immediately became a hot commodity.

The familiar old Lithuanian sat down next to Madis.

"They put you on insulin?"

Madis nodded.

"Ah, the wonders of Soviet psychiatric care . . . You know, this should all be written down somewhere. I've come up with a plan. A Ukrainian in Ward No. 4 will be visited by his mother from Lvov soon. We could try to slip an appeal to her and maybe, just maybe, she could somehow deliver it to some Polish contacts of mine . . . Can you write in English?"

"I don't think I can write anything right now."

"There's no hurry, it's not till next month . . . just get your brain into gear," the old man said, patting Madis on the shoulder before

moving on. Only moments after he left, another man plopped down in his place — this time a middle-aged patient from the adjacent ward. Madis had noticed him in the courtyard before.

"So, you're that Estonian? I'm Tomas from Kaunas," he said, extending a hand.

"Madis . . . There are a lot of you Kaunas guys . . ."

"Huh? What did Domantas tell you?"

"He said he was handing out leaflets at the university . . ."

Tomas snorted.

"Domantas is from Panevėžys. He raped three or four women, maybe more, stalking them when they went to the theater . . . Leaflets, ha! You've got to be careful when you choose who to listen to in this joint."

"Rape? He said he wanted to put together some letter to Voice of American . . ."

"He can go ahead and write to the Pope, for all I care," Tomas said, making the sign of the cross.

"Alright . . . and are you someone who can be believed?"

"You don't have to, but you can . . . Here, I'll show you . . . That guy with a limp over there, you see him?" Tomas said, pointing to a chubby man next to the wall. "He's gotten so fat that he must have gotten at least forty doses of insulin already. It fucks up your metabolism . . . And that guy wearing the cap over there? It's his second year. Twenty or thirty doses, I'm betting; he's a little leaner. If they feel like it's not having an effect and you're getting to be a bother, then they might start injecting you with sulfate for a change. It makes you feel like your whole body's on fire, and your muscles won't obey you. You don't want that, trust me — it's much, much harsher than insulin. Right . . . now look at the guys chatting about something there. . . the one on the left gets trihexyphenidyl for muscle stiffness, but the ones on the right want to use it to get high and are asking if he really took it or hid it in his cheek. You can get multiple packs of cigs for that . . . The guy with the weird restless legs by the door over there, I bet he's on levomepromazine . . . I've been here for three years, you get

me? . . . If you start giving the director any guff, then he'll give you ten, maybe even thirty more doses of insulin and sulfate as the cherry on top. You can tell him a hundred times that there's nothing wrong with you, but it don't matter. A big evaluating committee gets together once a year, somebody even shows up from Moscow, and they decide who to let go . . . But they don't give a shit about what you tell them anymore, you hear me?! You've been sentenced! The more problems you cause, the longer you'll be in here. If you shut up and go along with the show, then you'll get the easier sweets: haloperidol, pentetrazol, and that kind of stuff. What I'm trying to say is that if you go to war with them, then they'll bake your brain to a crisp. They're obligated to keep us locked up for a while, but the commission will have to make space at some point."

"So, what's your plan? Waiting it out like sheep?"

"You've got two options: pick your battles or try to go it alone. Until then . . . baa!" Tomas guffawed.

"Why are you telling me all of this? Is the next guy who sits down here going to be from Vilnius and tell me you're a serial murderer or something?"

"I wouldn't trust anybody from Vilnius if I were you. The true spirit's in Kaunas!" Tomas crowed. "You know, we should probably look out for each other . . . as much as that's possible here."

An orderly gave the sign for the men to go in for dinner, and each sauntered back to his ward. One of the pale-faced men Madis had encountered earlier, the one introduced as John Adams, trotted after him.

"Mr. Jefferson! Mr. Jefferson!" he called out in a hushed tone, grabbing Madis by the sleeve.

"I really don't feel like it right now . . . I've got to go," Madis sighed, trying to fend him off.

"No, no — you don't understand! I just wanted to tell you that I'm not crazy!" the young man whispered loudly.

"That's great. Me neither."

"No, you don't understand. I know I'm not John Adams — my

name is Vitya Belkin. From Smolensk."

"Oh . . . is that so."

"And Zhenya, he's not Franklin. His real name is Zhenya Koropaksin."

"Not Franklin? Well, I'll be . . ."

"Zhenya studied history at university but went cuckoo. He's genuinely insane!"

"I see. Well, what do you want me to do?"

"Don't be too hard on him if he wants to have a little . . . you know . . . formal chat every now and then. He'll be awfully sad otherwise . . . I got the impression that you were a little startled. The two of us just share the same background."

"You were a historian as well?" Madis asked, arching his eyebrows.

"No, no! He's from Smolensk, too. I just got wrapped up in this whole misunderstanding. Matches and . . . it doesn't matter. Just don't be too hard on him, okay? That's all I wanted to ask."

A couple days later, Madis Jefferson granted his approval to convene the Second Congressional Congress to discuss a declaration of independence.

Translated by ADAM CULLEN



KAIRI LOOK
(1988)

DANCING THE DUST FROM THE FLOOR

A small girl growing up with her (great-) grandmother, the pillar of life. Each chapter comprises an enchanting fragment of memory in which the sensitive narrator analyses what once was. Some memories are painful, yet pulse positivity. Look's writing is even-paced, deeply introspective, and extremely personal – like a butterfly slowly emerging from its cocoon.



Kairi Look

TANTSI TOLM PÕRANDAST

Kultuurileht 2025, 168 p.

IN THE BEGINNING

No light, no time, but space, and the space is warm. She swings and swirls, has a wave and a rhythm. Boundaries stretch and yield, and she bounces against the wall and whirls within a soft shell. She is a beginning, she is a beginning within a beginning, as yet she has no time, but still she is already present, she is in play, she has a place she belongs. She whirls in time with several pulses, in time with every pulse that was and is and will be.

She has no name, no words. Everything is still clear and correct.

IN THE BEGINNING

In the very beginning is a whisper. A whisper in the occipital, a throb behind the temporal bone, unease between the ribs. It's been there for years and now it's breaking the surface, seeking space, form, and language. Who are you?

A good child has many names.

They're calling you aboard.

IN THE BEGINNING

Then it began, they will say later. It began, they say, but they know it is not the beginning, that there was no beginning, that in the beginning there is merely a row of letters, two empty syllables, a tangled-up ball forgotten in the bottom of a basket gaining strength and biding its time until one day it falls to the ground and starts bouncing along. Sometimes the beginning rolls into a corner, behind a door or cupboard, until it is found and returned to the basket, and sometimes it seems as if beginnings raise a tower from which you can see more clearly. But then the tower collapses, the remains glow, give off smoke and turn black, and the remains are given a story and a name.

One day a child climbs inside the rubble. She crouches down, rummages through the ashes, fishes out a piece and takes it home. Time passes and her find begins to crumble, a beginning emerges from beneath its shell, and for a moment it is new, for a moment it is newly born, for a moment it is an innocent beginning.

And the end? There are springs, summers, autumns, winters.

1.

When will you die? the child asked.

And Grandma answered: *Soon. But that's not something you need to be concerned about.*

The paper rustles as it turns.

When will I die? the child asks.

And Grandma answers. You're only just beginning.

The child is sitting on a rug in Grandma's room, Grandma, who is actually Great-Grandma, and for the first time, the child forms the word 'die'. Dying is not part of her daily life. The child thinks about the hill where they go sledding and about the swing, the book with Vanapagan the ogre, the child thinks of the cheese sweating on the kitchen table, and the wolf sticker under the chair. At times the child thinks of Grandma's Bible, written in letters that have hooks on them. The child hasn't thought about death before though.

The room has a smell of motherwort and camphor balm. The Bible rests on the cupboard ledge. The books are on the shelf. Grandma's dark-spotted hands are the softest thing the child knows. For stroking her head, helping her get dressed, picking her up, and turning the pages.

Grandma's world: bed and night table, lamp with a golden button, peppermints in a tin. Flowers on a table. Bookshelf, armchair, rug. Aloe pot. Wardrobe. A clematis hangs over the cupboard. The door to the room is open when Grandma hasn't decided it should be closed. Out through the window a squirrel idles in the treetop. The tree is a rowan.

The door opens quietly. The rug is rough under bare feet.

Here, the two of them rule the roost: Grandma and the child.

The Bible says that good people go to heaven, but the wicked burn in hell. The thought makes the child uneasy. She's a good child and not afraid of hell, but the thought of the devil prancing — somehow she just knows that this is the devil's natural way of moving — among lapping fiery tongues terrifies her. In the child's mind, the devil dances between the blazing flames, he jumps very high and waves a red pitchfork around, he's thin and hairy and his hair is long and black, only his tail is bare, and at the end of the tail is a spread-out tassel that beats against the ground and glows like charcoal. The child doesn't like heat, she's afraid of the countryside lady's sauna with its hot tin bowls and hissing hot water tap that splashes boiling water. Sinners are boiled like that in hell, the child is sure that the devil has those bowls too, shiny and silvery, with handles. But hell is a long way away and only evil people are taken there. The devil won't get her, she won't be boiled up.

The radiator hums and the child touches a button on Grandma's housecoat. The books have Grandmother's voice, pauses and coughs, the rustle and rhythm of page-turning. One line follows the next, resonates with the following one, and when Grandma turns the page, the world stands firmly in place. Tomorrow, she and Mum will go sledding and Grandma will read aloud. The day after tomorrow, she and Mum will go sledding, more and more snow will fall, again! the child will cry out, and mum, laughing, will pull up the sled, and in the evening, Grandma will read aloud. Grandma, book, Mum, sled, Grandma, book, Mum, sled. It gets quite cold at night. Blooms of ice sparkle in the window.

A wooden swing hangs from the door frame. It's hard and red. Help! the child commands, and Grandma lifts the child into the swing. Hurry up! cries the child. Grandma's hands grab the swing seat. Fast! says the child, everything is quiet, only the clock is ticking, tick-tick-tick-tick, and then the swing takes off. The child flies further away and the swing arches higher and higher. Legs dangling, toe reaching the ground, then the heel, then the soles. Grandma stands behind the child. The swing flies.

There are myths and fairytales in the room, hymns and the Bible, albums and health manuals. Grandma dozes, a book in her lap. The child tugs at the book cover. Grandma doesn't move. Now the book is in the child's hands; now it's on the floor. Now the Bible flops down from the night table and lands beside it. The child heaves herself up into the armchair. She climbs on the armrest, gets on tiptoe. The book with the blue cover is on the uppermost bookshelf. The child's finger touches its rough back, even scratches it, the book comes closer and falls into her hands.

The child lies on her stomach on the floor, opens the books, takes the lid off the box and fishes out a felt-tip. She colours the Ss yellow (Snork Maiden, Simon, sciatica), the Hs red (holy, Hemulen, heart) and the Os pink (Lady of the Cold, Moses, psychosis). The page where the squirrel looks at the Lady of the Cold and freezes, the child colours light blue and draws a large black cross over the squirrel. She puts her name at the bottom. The last letter touches the squirrel's straggly tail.

The child doesn't colour in the book with the dog and the girl. The text is dense, the child runs her finger along it. The lines ripple before her eyes. *If you go down to the quay in Stock*... she reads, yes, go on, says Mum, *Stockholm*, great, Mum says, now try the next line. *On a*... the finger slides along the paper *summer morning* the child spells out, you almost read it just then, Mum says, see, just look, the child puts her finger next to Mum's, *and see*, the child reads on ...*a little white boat called Sea*... yes, says mum encouragingly, what does that make, *Seac* great, carry on, Mum's voice says, *Seaco* spells the child and tugs her nose, *Seago*... The voice fades. A drop falls on the paper.

A little white boat called Seacrow I lying there says Mum. Now the water is coming in streams. Mum puts her arms around the child, her cheek touches the wet forehead, the dripping nose. Oh, sweetheart. The child slips off the chair. The door to Grandma's room slams. Mum sighs, leans on the chair seat and takes an apple from the bowl, touches its waxy peel. Brings the book closer. Brushes the yellowish page with the back of her hand and wipes the eye-water off the paper. *If you go down to the quay in Stockholm on a summer morning* she reads and bites into the apple, *and see a little white boat called Seacrow I lying there*. Time rumbles on. She spends the winter break lying on her bed and cannot get the Carpenter's Cottage out of her head: she's there, in the courtyard, with the high sky of a June day, and Melker's working on the chimney, and Mum laughs, laughs so hard that the child comes to the kitchen door and watches in amazement.

There are holes in the book.

The child crouches by Grandma's door and touches the wallpaper. It has purple flowers, as purple as the hair of the lady at the polyclinic. The lady teaches her words, the words of grown-ups so that they can understand each other, says the lady, because this is the only way we have to understand each other, the same language, now look at what I am doing, tongue up.

The child watches. A thin dribble runs out of her mouth. The lady's hair is purple. Tongue tip up, she says. Purple like Grandma's veins. She shows the child a picture and rolls. Rat, the lady says. Look: rat. The child sighs. Lat, she says. Rat, the lady says. Lat, says the child. Rat, the lady says. She pushes her tongue out of her mouth and points her finger up. Rolls her tongue in her mouth. Let's try it together. The child takes picture of the rat home with her.

Lat, the child mutters in the shade of the room at home. Grandma moves about in the kitchen.

The child puts a fingernail behind the wallpaper and tears it. The wall is white and rough. Lat, she intones, digging her nail into the plaster, scratching the wall, pushing her tongue out of her mouth and looking over her shoulder. The rat picture is on the table. Lat, the child says to the rat, listen, lat. The rat doesn't answer. Dirty lat cries the child and sticks her tongue out at the rat. She grabs the wallpaper, the paper rips, she peels it grimly, her tongue finds her palate, and something leaps in her stomach. The child mutters. She jumps up. Grandma!

A figure appears on the door.

Rat! the child cries.

A ladle lands on the floor.

The child throws her hands out and shrieks: Rat, Grandma, rat!

Grandma presses her hand to her chest. The child turns pale, shrinks, the strip of wallpaper falls down in a crumpled pile.

She's been deceived, the bare patch of wall stings her, the lady lied, Grandma doesn't understand her, Grandma doesn't speak the same language.

Grandma clutches the child, forces out a laugh, shakes her head, bows to pick up the ladle, picks up the wallpaper strip from the floor and puts it in her apron pocket.

The child laughs loudly along with her.

The elves live in the forest. The mermaids live in the lake. A snake lives in the Garden of Eden. People speak the language of birds. The builders of the Tower of Babel don't understand each other. The Frog of the North eats people. The king trots around naked and no one says a word. The devil's afraid of thunder. On a moonlit night, the daughters of the Forest Father climb a treetop and whisper.

How high up were they? the child asks. Right at the top?

I should think so, says Grandma. She's looking for the right place. Silver whisks stood between the treetops and silver buckets of water were ready on the platform, she reads.

Were the treetops higher than the Tower of Babylon? the child asks

I don't know, Grandma says. But I think they were both quite tall.

The child nodded solemnly. And above the fairies, God hovered, making sure that they did not fall down. And if anyone was afraid, God said, come here, fairy, listen to what I'm saying, the child makes the sound of thunder, what are you waiting for, fairy, sit on my knee. Come on, come on.

The child also knows about the god of the sea, the god of fire, the god of beauty, the god of wisdom. There are many gods. The child thinks it's a good thing, that many are better than one, that way one of them will always be awake and keeping an eye on people. One of them might get tired. One of them might get sick. One of them might break his leg or have a burst appendix. Old people are infirm, they get sick easily and then spend a long time in bed. If a god gets the flu, do you have to put mustard plasters on him, worries the child, it must be cold up there in the sky, it's sleeting, and the snow is falling on the inside of coat collars.

And then the doctor comes in and puts a cold tube on his naked back! Do they even have doctors in heaven? What if a god dies up there! the child anguishes.

He won't die, Grandma says. But I don't know exactly how these things work either. God is in nature too. He's in trees and birds and stones. Grandma pats the blanket. The child crawls into her lap. The housecoat is warm.

Grandma waters the flowers and picks the dried petals off the roses.

Once upon a time, a man went to cut down trees in the forest, she tells the child while she does all this. All the trees begged him, please don't cut me. The man agreed, and didn't chop them down. Then the Forest Father appeared. He had a long beard, a shirt of woven grass and a coat of spruce bark. And he gave the man a magic wand of gold in gratitude.

The child's eyes widen.

The rod brought diligence, says Grandma. Every task the man did succeeded, and he became wealthy. There's power in the trees. We take care of the forest, and the forest takes care of us.

Didn't that spruce-bark coat tickle his back? the child asks.

It did, Grandma says. But I suppose he got used to it.

A crow is cawing outside the window. The child runs to the glass. The bird crunches on the frozen berries still left on the rowan. The child's toes almost reach the ground when she's on the windowsill.

The sound of scraping is a winter alarm clock and a frosty opening chord. It starts with a shovel until the ground is clear, then the brush and glass join in, and finally the soloist enters, the spluttering cranky engine. The concert starts well before dawn and echoes between the apartment buildings under the dull yellow sky. Dad starts the car and opens the door for Mum. The child and Grandma wave from the window. There are tracks in the snow.

Grandma doesn't have outdoor shoes.

The sun is not up yet. The child fetches the newspaper. Grandma gets out her notebook. They set to work, stretch out their fingers, diligent chroniclers, pens in their hands. Today it's 7 degrees below freezing, the sun rises at 9:17 and sets at 15:19. The blue book also covers winter. Everyone's asleep, someone eats spruce needles, snow's coming down the chimney, the hemuls go skiing and the world is silent and creepy.

Grandma spends the daylight hours in her armchair. The child swings on her chair at the table. Outside there's a snowstorm. Don't chew that, Grandma says. The child takes her finger out of her mouth, drops the pencil and wood clatters onto wood. It falls to the floor. The finger snaps the switch. Grandma shakes her head. On and off, on and off. Grandma raises her hand to her eyes. Turns the page. Looks up. And then the squirrel looked at the Lady of the Cold and froze, she says. The squirrel didn't heed the warnings. He looked into the Lady of the Cold's eyes, fell down and froze to death. The book slams shut.

The child's finger stops. And was that it? Did they have a funeral and bury the squirrel in the ground?

Do you think so? Grandma asks.

The child nods solemnly and scratches her bare leg.

He thaws out, Grandma says. When spring comes, the squirrel thaws out. He runs around again and his tail is very fluffy.

That's right, the child thinks. You can't just die for disobedience.

Behind the child the flowers on the wallpaper are dancing, a stormy sea dances. You can't, Grandma agrees.

The snow is falling even more heavily. The child thinks of the squirrels in the forest.

It'll start melting tomorrow. The sun will rise two minutes earlier.

Grandma's standing by the window. The child draws on the floor.

My mother knew the moon spells. Grandma said. They were read out at the New Moon and Old Moon. Then you would get your wish!

And did the wish come true? asks the child. She sticks out her tongue and draws a yellow ball above the spruces.

That didn't matter, Grandma says. What mattered was that you made the request. She sits on the edge of the bed and closes her eyes. Golden youth, give me the power, she chants. *From the clouds you gain strength, Mighty Mother, hear my spell. Share the power, share the wisdom*. Like that.

Mother? the child wonders. The moon's a man! Cats are girls and dogs are boys.

The moon is everything, Grandma says. In the end, everything is one and the same. You just said the moon was a mother, says the child.

Grandma doesn't answer. She takes some ointment and begins rubbing it into her feet.

Yuck, says the child, it stinks. She draws small teeth on the moon and colours its lips pink.

Translated by DARCY HURFORD

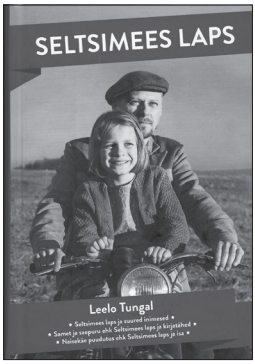


LEELO TUNGAL
(1947)

COMRADE KID AND THE GROWN-UPS

A warmly humorous autobiographical story about a young Estonian girl whose mother is sent to the Siberian Gulag in 1950, accused of treason against the Soviet regime. The puckish child is raised by her father, a schoolteacher, and believes that if she's a good girl her mother will return home. The book has been adapted into a popular feature-length film.

Translations: Finnish, German, Hungarian, Latvian, Lithuanian, Polish, Russian



Leelo Tungal
SELTSIMEES LAPS
JA SUURED INIMESED

Tänapäev 2008, 215 p.

Chapter 1
WOULDN'T IT BE GOOD TO BE A GOOD KID

Some children are born good, their behaviour is exemplary from the start. A good child, a well-behaved child, never wears saggy stockings, they never let their hairband come loose, they never get dirt between their toes, and they never put their right sandal on their left foot (or vice versa). A well-behaved child isn't scared of the dark, or of thunderstorms, or goshawks, or the bull at the kolkhoz or of men in uniform. A well-behaved

child doesn't laugh when their mouth is full of soup, they don't mess about with their porridge or put off going to the toilet until it's almost too late. In short, they never get up to anything which might cause shame or upset anyone.

It would be good to be a well-behaved child.

If I'd been a good child, a well-behaved child, then Mum wouldn't have left, that much is for sure. She'd forgiven me for plenty of things, that's true, but eventually she must have just had enough. Stuff happens to me on a regular basis that a well-behaved child would only see in their worst dreams.

When I help Mum dry the dishes, you can be sure that the prettiest, fanciest cup or plate will slip right out of my fingers, and always when it's already been washed, rinsed, and dried. If there's so much as one little puddle on the path, then I'll be sure to end up feet-first in it, if two men wearing long overcoats and armed with rifles happen to be waiting at the door, then I'll trip right over one of their big boots, and if there is a pile of books and papers in the middle of the room, then I'll be sure to land in it head-first. And tears will come to Mum's eyes as she watches

'Lock that little brat up somewhere!' shouted the man in the black leather coat, pointing his fat finger at me.

Mum put her arms around me and hugged me tight. Her eyes were glistening wet, and I started sobbing, too. In fact, I'd hurt my tummy when I fell on the hard corner of a book, but that slight pain wasn't nearly as bad as that horrible man's horrible voice. 'Brat' is a horrible word — and it was clearly directed at me, how awful! Grown-ups are allowed to do whatever they want: complete strangers can turn up at our house, pull out the desk drawers and chuck all the papers onto the floor, they can pull the books off the shelves and fling them in the same direction — and Mum doesn't say a single angry word, all she does is sigh! Whenever I leave my toys lying about at the end of the day, or I rummage about in Mum and Dad's drawers, or I draw a couple of pictures in some boring old book, then I never hear the end of it!

The guy in the black coat stood there looking like he owned the place, one hand in his pocket and the other one pointing at me: 'Get that little runt out of here!'

'Be a good girl and go to the other room!' Mum said, shooting an angry glance at the unwelcome guest. 'I'm sure everything will be just fine! Probably just some misunderstanding...'

She took me to my bedroom and switched on the light. Mum knew very well how scared of the dark I was. It was still daytime, but the light was already quite dim indoors. An old, leafless willow tree peeked in through the lace curtains, sometimes it even played a nasty trick on me, pressing its wizened face right up against the windowpane.

'Look at your books, or do a jigsaw for a while!' said Mum, shutting the door behind her.

'Sign it!' I heard the gruff voice the other side of the door. 'And put the date as well: the twelfth of April nineteen fifty-one!'

It was quite odd — why had Mum done as that nasty man said and left me to languish in my room? Things must have been pretty serious: I would have to try my very hardest to be a good kid, starting right now

Anyway, who wants to be a bad kid? Not me, that's for sure: I always try to do the right thing, and I'm always full of the very best intentions — it's just my bad luck that half of the things I try end up going wrong.

One of my morning misdeeds was plain for all to see, on the door between the living room and the kitchen; I had taken a crayon and covered the door with pictures of princesses. I'd wanted to make the door as pretty as possible, but the surface turned out to be a bit rougher than I thought, so my princesses ended up looking more like goblins. Then when I tried to wipe them off with an old rag it made things even worse. The door looked like it had been bombarded with potfuls of ink and pink semolina. No wonder Mum lost her temper and gave me a proper scolding. Although it wasn't very nice of her to say that my drawings were fit for a pigsty — I don't think pigs can draw

with crayons. Mum got even angrier when she saw that Sirka and Tuiam had been cavorting in the bedroom, where they'd knocked over the chairs and rumpled up Mum and Dad's bedspread. I'd completely forgotten that they weren't allowed to be together in the same room during the mating season, and who would have guessed that little crooked-legged Tuiam could have jumped as high as the bed.

'Well, let's hope that the size difference between the dachshund and the Estonian hound counts for something,' Mother sighed to herself, but it was clear from her expression that it wasn't the last we would hear on the subject of the kitchen door and the dogs' nuptials.

But would you believe it! After the visit of the men with rifles, Mum seemed to completely forget about the multi-coloured door and the dogs' antics.

There was a pile of my bedtime storybooks and boxes of jigsaw blocks on the bedside cabinet. I had fun playing with the blocks until I got the knack of putting them together. In the beginning the dog's head ended up on the chicken's neck, and the horse's bushy tail on the cow's backside. The first time I managed to assemble the dog with the big head all by myself, I was jubilant — that was just the kind of feeling a good, well-behaved child would have! Pretty soon I worked out that if you removed the pieces in rows, then you could put them back together twice as fast — another welcome discovery! But how many times does anyone want to do the same puzzle. It was true that assembling the jigsaws quickly could earn you the praise of the women of the village, but something told me that the guy in the squeaky black coat didn't care one way or the other about a picture of a cow or a cockerel. I would have to find some other way of informing him that in our house I was referred to not as 'brat' but 'our little songbird', 'our young philosopher', 'our bundle of joy' or 'an unusually bright kid'. Well, they called me 'naughty kid' as well sometimes, but in a completely different tone of voice from the one he'd used to call me 'brat'. So I sat there on Mum and Dad's

bed, swinging my legs backwards and forwards, wondering what I should do next.

I heard the murmur of voices from the other room: the man speaking in a loud, angry voice and Mum answering calmly, her voice just slightly raised. Mum is a soprano, and she can sing in such a bright voice that it gives you goose bumps! Even I couldn't produce such high-pitched notes.

But a bit of singing would be a good way of showing that brat-guy that there is a little songbird living in this house, not some runt! Singing was always a sure way of raising the grown-ups' spirits, and I knew a lot of songs — maybe not all the way through, but at least I knew the first bits of all of Mum's songs off by heart. So, I started off by singing:

'Where is my garden, in its spring garb?

Where is my darling, the blossoming apple tree?

My friend, I feel

That you are waiting for me this fine spring month!'

It was such a pretty, sad song that it made me despondent. Dad's songs were much jollier. Like, for example:

'I drank champagne like it was water,

While Mariett sat on my knee!'

Or another one: 'Back when our samovar whistled, do you remember my pretty one? Natasha, Nataaasha, fate has taken you far from me!'

My favourite bit was the way he drawled the word Nataaasha, and I liked yelling it at the top of my voice.

Suddenly the door was flung wide open, causing the handle to knock against the wall, and the man in the black coat rushed up to me. He grabbed me by the shoulders and shook me so hard that it made my eyes water and my nose run.

'Damned contra brat! Will you shut your trap or do we have to take you with us as well! Damned kulak sprog!' the man yelled, and I noticed his teeth were rotten. His black coat stank, and it squeaked as he moved. The man was as vile as the picture of Death in my 'Nightingale' book, but the most frightening thing

of all was that when he let me go, he yelled into the other room in RUSSIAN! That was too much! It could only mean something bad was happening, something really bad! I didn't understand a thing the man had said, but I recognised the sound of Russian: it was the language those men in black had spoken when they took grandma Mari away... That was a long time ago, and I couldn't remember what grandma or those men looked like anymore, but the sound of the language they'd spoken was still fresh in my ears. Those men in black haunted my dreams — every time I saw them it brought on such a rush of terror that all I could do was run to Mum and Dad's bed and snuggle between them. The grownups called them 'deporters' but for me they were men in black — and now it looked like they were back, but in real life this time! From a distance they'd looked like any other men with guns — just like Dad's hunting friends — but after a while it was clear that it was those same men in black.

I didn't mean to shout, honest! I just wanted to escape from that place, from my bed, my room, from this world, where the men in black could appear at any moment, in my dreams and in real life; I wanted to escape from this shaken-up little body. Why isn't it possible to turn into a voice and just fly away?

I woke up in my own bed, with a strange taste of medicine in my mouth. There was a large suitcase on the badger-skin rug by the bed, and Mum had almost finished packing it. For a moment I thought that the nightmare was over... but it wasn't, because I could still hear the murmur of strange voices coming from the other room. But Mum was close by now, and Dad had got home too, so now there was nothing to be scared of.

They put some fresh stockings and trousers on me, because at some point I must have weed myself — I was embarrassed, but it couldn't be helped: these things happen. Dad brought me my coat and hat from the corridor, but Mum wanted to dress me herself. 'It might be the last time,' she said, and she took my muffler out of the cupboard — me and Mum had exactly the same kind, covered in ruffled grey fur. Only that my muffler was much smaller, and

there was no purse in the pocket.

'It's totally insane!' Dad fumed. 'It's impossible to have a sensible conversation with that investigator! But you'll see right away that it's just some silly mix-up! You'll be back home tomorrow!'

Mum didn't reply until we had got to the big road, where a strange-looking truck was waiting — at least it looked like a truck, but instead of the usual back end it seemed to have some sort of dark-green house sitting on the back.

'Yes — it's completely absurd!' Mum said, looking at the car, and shaking her head. 'A truck with a prison cell on the back, and bars across the windows! I don't know, maybe they've got me mixed up with someone else? If I'm not back by tomorrow, call the education department and tell them what's happened.'

The men in black walked just behind us, their rifles on their backs, but they didn't utter a single word. Even the man in the leather coat said nothing, he just swore quietly to himself. So many people had come to see off Mum that it took a while to hug them all and shake their hands. One of our neighbours, Armiida, had tears streaming down her freckled cheeks, but Mum just said in her usual jolly voice: 'No need to cry — it's not as if it's my funeral or anything! For all you know we'll be at the barn with a milk pail tomorrow asking for some of Klaara's milk!' That just made Armiida sob even louder, and she didn't stop until Artur put his hand on her shoulder and ordered her sternly: 'Woman, stop whimpering!'

Mum hugged me and Dad longer than anyone else.

'Be a good kid!' she called out when she had climbed up the iron ladder to the door on the back of the truck. 'If you're a good kid then Mum will be back soon! Maybe tomorrow, maybe the day after tomorrow... the main thing is be a good kid and do what Dad says, OK!'

We stood for a while watching as the truck drove off. The sun disappeared behind the tall trees next to the school building, and a pleasant aroma of petrol mixed with maple syrup came wafting through the air.

'Mum left the syrup on boil,' I remembered suddenly. Dad didn't answer, he just turned away.

But that was only to be expected: who would want to talk to the world's naughtiest kid! The kind who scribbles on doors, lets the dogs into the bedroom, yells their heads off, and wets their knickers! I should be grateful that Dad hadn't gone off with the men in black as well and left me completely on my own!

There was just one thing I didn't know: how had those men in black found out who was the mother of the world's naughtiest kid? And how would I let them know when I'd finally — by tomorrow, let's say — learned how to be a good, well-behaved kid. The mothers of good, well-behaved girls never go off and leave their children behind, and certainly never in the company of those men in black.

PLAYING THE HOUSEWIFE

Grown-ups are clever and know how to do lots of things, that's for sure. They can read books, play musical instruments, cut the hay, dig the ground, and light the hob. They can tie shoelaces and hairbands in a flash, and the same goes for doing up and undoing buttons, fasteners, and zips. Sometimes they say such complicated things that it's impossible to understand them, even if they do seem to be speaking Estonian. You might be able to memorise one of the words they used — like 'arrest' or 'NKVD*' or 'amnesty' — which sounded pretty fancy, but their meaning would remain a complete mystery. I like saying those strange words, sometimes just in a whisper to myself, sometimes singing them out-loud. 'NKVD, NKVD, yippee, yippee' sounds pretty cool sung to the melody of 'In Vändra Forest'. When I first discovered that and sang it

* Translator's note: Soviet secret police, predecessor of KGB.

to Mum and Dad they laughed until tears came to their eyes. And their laughter was so jolly, not like the hurtful laughter I heard that time I walked backwards into the bath. That's right, grown-ups' laughter can sometimes be quite nasty, even if they are your mum and dad and they call you their little bundle of joy! Try it for yourself, if you want to know what it feels like to be a little bundle of joy sprawling in a heap of wet, soapy, sheets. At first, I laughed along — I don't know why, maybe just out of politeness — but then the soap started stinging my eyes, and I burst into tears.

Ugh, what a horrible memory, splashing about in that bath. It came back to me when we got back from seeing Mum off, and we found the kitchen floor as wet as it had been that winter when Daddy had rescued me from the bath, only that this time it was much dirtier. Together with the big muddy boot prints there were loads of paw prints. Sirka and Tuiam had returned from their nuptials and were romping about in the living room.

'Damn, that's all we needed!' yelled Dad, yanking Tuiam away from Sirka and taking him to the scullery.

'Well then, my little one,' he said, putting his hand on my shoulder and looking serious. 'We'll have to get you playing housewife, until Mum gets back. Let's try and get everything ship-shape by tomorrow, alright?'

To start with the two of us cleaned the kitchen floor, then we put the books back on the shelves in the living room, and the papers back into the desk drawers. The laundry cupboard in the scullery could have done with a tidy, too — the guy in the black overcoat had pulled out all the bed linen and tablecloths — but Dad reckoned that there was no hurry with that, and so he just lifted the pile of laundry onto the table, out of Tuiam's reach.

The scullery is where Mum keeps the dishes and clothes that we don't use much. There's no stove in that room, so it's too cold to use in the winter.

Actually, it was pretty cold in all those rooms, you could only walk about without woollen socks on in the summer. In the kitchen, the flame on the hob blazed away all day long — you

could take your socks off there, but who wanted to faff about taking them on and off all the time. There are long, stripy mats running through the kitchen and the living room, but badger pelts next to the beds — Dad and Tuiam's hunting trophies. It's especially chilly near the windows — we jokingly call it 'the Nordics'. In the autumn we fit double-glazing, and Mum fills all the gaps around the window with foam and sticks strips of paper on top, but when you put your hand over the paper, you can feel the wind sprites puffing the cold air in.

The toilet is even colder, but I don't go there, I've got my own little potty under the bed. Mum puts on her hat and scarf to go to the toilet, but Dad comes back from there hollering, 'Here comes the cold-proofed son of the famous Russian horticulturist Michurin!' or 'The brave American Indian 'Eagle Coldpee' returns from his scouting mission!'

Mum normally replies that she can't wait until everything is back to normal so we can move back into our flat.

Our flat is inside the school building — it's so bright and warm! The stoves are white and shiny, the walls are brightly-painted, the windows are big, and the toilet is clean enough for kids to use. Only that there is a lady called Ludmila living in our flat now. Ludmila took over from Mum as school director, because they thought she would do a better job of leading the school into the bright Stalinist future. It was because Ludmila had arrived from Siberia, the same place where they sent grandma Mari. Listening to the grown-ups talking, I'd got the impression that if grandma Mari ever got back from Siberia, then she might become school director. But Mum smiled sadly and said that granny Mari would come back, that was for sure, but at her age she would be too old to be school director — she was already eighty-four when she was deported, and her hearing had not been too good back then, who knew if she still had her sight or hearing now... 'As Grandma wrote in her letter, she did well to have survived the long rail journey in the cattle carriage, and still have enough strength to work the fields in that Shadrino kolkhoz!'

I spent the whole time following Dad around and tidying up, but my thoughts kept coming back to Mum.

'Daddy, were those men in black who Mum went away with the same ones who took grandma Mari?'

'No, where did you get that idea?' Dad said tetchily. 'They were different ones! And anyway, Mum will be back soon enough, don't you worry about that! Granny Mari was taken to Siberia because she owned a large farmstead. But she wasn't deported on her own — they took a lot of Estonians to the frozen east, because they owned large farms or factories or fancy houses. Such things are frowned upon these days, but your Mum devoted her life to teaching children, she owns no land or houses or riches of any sort. When the bigwigs see her, they'll say right away: 'Sorry, sorry, there's been a big mistake! We'll take you home right away!' Then Mum will come back and she'll be upset to see how messy it is here, as messy as groats and cabbage!'

'Like groats and cabbage,' I said, repeating Dad's phrase. I liked the sound of that!

'I could do with some groats and cabbage right now! I'm hungry!'

Dad remembered he hadn't eaten anything since breakfast. He brought the jug of milk from the scullery, cut several large slices of bread, and spread them with syrup from the pot on the hob.

'I've got no idea what Mum planned to do with all this maple syrup, but she'll be able to decide for herself tomorrow!' he said half-apologetically. 'But we can help ourselves to a bit of it on a hard day like this. We haven't got any groats or cabbage anyway...'

Me and Dad both have a really sweet tooth, but sugar is hard to come by these days, which was why Mum boiled up this maple syrup.

We had the job of getting hold of that maple sap: first me and Dad drilled holes in some large maple trees, then dad whittled some spiles from some bits of wood, and then we tapped them into the holes with a hammer. Dad cut deep furrows into the

spiles and the maple sap trickled into the plastic canisters which we'd hung up to catch it... In the evenings, when Dad got home from school, we went by each tree and emptied the contents of the plastic canisters into a large pail. Maple sap tastes nice, a bit like the taste of snow but sweeter. And when Mum boils it up on the stove, then the whole kitchen smells wonderful, just as if a whole snowdrift had melted there, and bluebells had sprung up. It's because the water evaporates, leaving the sugar syrup in the pot. There's always so little syrup left that it's hard to believe that you started out with a container brimming with sap! But that small quantity of syrup is as sweet and runny as honey, just a bit lighter in colour.

'Do you want a one-handed slice of bread, or a two-handed one?' asked Dad with a cunning look on his face. 'You know that old story, where the master asks the farmhand, which one he wants — a one or two-handed slice? Of course, the greedy farmhand asks for a two-handed one — because it must be two times larger! But no such luck: the master cuts him such a thin slice that it's almost see-through. 'There you go — there's a slice of bread which you have to hold with two hands, otherwise it will break in two!' said the master, cutting himself a nice thick slice of bread. 'This is a one-handed one, it stays in one piece so you can hold it in one hand!"

I felt a bit sorry for the farmhand, but I chuckled along with Dad — he cut some nice fat slices of bread, all one-handed ones, and the syrup left such a nice sweet taste in my mouth.

It was a lot easier to be a good kid with Dad than with Mum: Mum would already have scolded me for letting the syrup drip on the tablecloth, but Dad paid no attention to either the syrup or the splashes of milk on my jumper, he just said: 'My grandma told me that story. She had all sorts of stories to tell!'

'Tell me another one of Grandma's stories!' I begged, but Dad looked at the clock and said in alarm: 'Oh, you should have been in bed ages ago! What will Mother say when she finds out we've been chatting about the olden days into the middle of the night!'

That's typical of grownups: just when things look like getting interesting, they send you to bed! In that respect, Dad was as dependable as Mum. He responded to my pleas with a mumble: 'Women's crying or children's whining, it doesn't help — the men will drink their way through the money all the same!'

I was shocked: 'Are you going to drink all the money, when I'm in bed?' But Dad just laughed: 'That was another thing my grandma used to say! She was the daughter of an innkeeper from Rannamõisa, she heard all the village folk's talk from an early age!'

I cunningly tried to nudge Dad's thoughts in the direction of his grandma so as to try and put off my bedtime, but he was resolute: 'Wash your hands and face and put your night-shirt on! Don't you remember Mum told you to be a good kid?'

There wasn't much I could say to that...

Helping me to put my nightshirt on, Dad added: 'If you're good, then we can go to Grandad's birthday at Jõgisoo tomorrow!'

'But...'

'No buts!' said Dad, lifting me into bed. 'Pull the quilt over you, head on the pillow, and get to sleep!'

'So is a good kid supposed to sleep in felt boots then?' I asked as quickly as I could, so that Dad wouldn't have time to interrupt.

'Dear me!' Dad said in dismay when he saw my feet. 'You've still got your felt booties on — and your galoshes on top! Dear oh dear!'

He took off my boots and put them by the stove: 'They'll be nice and warm in the morning!'

Then when he wished me good night and kissed me he added, a bit sheepishly: 'Listen, be a good kid and don't tell Mum you went to bed in your felt booties, alright?'

I nodded magnanimously. It was much easier to be a good kid with Dad than it was with Mum!

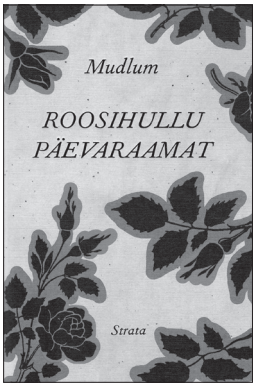
Translated by MATTHEW HYDE



MUDLUM
(1966)

DIARY OF A ROSE FANATIC

A story about an individual and a garden, soil and roses, the birds of the sky and the bugs beneath the ground. It's fine reading for both those who dig through the dirt up to their elbows and those who'd rather lounge on a little bench beside a hedge and not lift a finger.



Mudlum

ROOSIHULLU
PÄEVARAAMAT

Strata 2024, 240 p.

[pp 5—15]

When it seems like there's nothing left to do, you plant a garden. Who would have guessed that someone, who as a child feigned sickness at the height of summer just to get out of hoeing beets, would one day grow to love weeding? Of course, those beet furrows were a different kettle of fish entirely, they certainly didn't qualify as a garden. To plod listlessly along a seemingly endless furrow in some dusty kolkhoz field in the mid-day heat, and then knock yourself out to get the job done because there was a contest to see who would

reach the end of the furrow first. As far as I recall, for my work, which lasted only a few days, I was paid four rubles and change. My nerves wouldn't hold up any longer. Was it the work that didn't agree with me, or was it the other children, probably the two of them together. This used to be called "work-based learning". I suppose parents just wanted to get the kids out of the way in the summer — what would they have done at home anyway? Drink lemonade and read books, sunbathe down by the river. Enjoy being lazy and having a good time.

In any case, with me, those tricks didn't work. No matter where I was sent, I always found a way to cut loose. Once, I was sent to a Pioneer Camp. The bus departed from the front of the Estonia Theatre, full of students of every age, many almost too old for Pioneer Camp, dressed like prima donnas, straight from Tallinn. Others, like me, came from smaller towns, canvas sneakers, and some better clothes packed into our suitcases. Nestled in a pine forest, the place was beautiful, even I could see that, but each and every day was jam-packed with so many activities that, before the week was over, I had managed to smuggle myself into the infirmary, where I ate cinnamon toast with a healthy appetite. The doctor could see that I was faking, and let me know in no uncertain terms that he knew. I remember feeling burning shame, not because of what I did, finagling was in my blood, but because I got caught. Mother always believed me.

There was no hoeing at the camp, but every hour there were relay races, evening get-togethers, tug-of-war, or nighttime disturbances. There was always something, something that had to be done as a group, everything according to a schedule. There was never a moment to be alone, we even slept cheek to jowl, eight girls to a room.

Unlike the beet furrows at the kolkhoz, there was nothing wrong with our own allotment garden. It was located on deserted farmland in Paide, behind the cinema, just before the trade school dormitory. Teachers were allocated little strips of land, which they cultivated as best as they could. We had a couple of

rows of early potatoes, some broad beans, peas, lettuce, radishes, dill. I have no idea what became of that garden when we went to Muhu for the summer. In any case, a fresh salad with sour cream and a bit of sand crunching under your teeth tasted so good. A pinch of sugar and a bit of salt were mixed into the sour cream. All the salads were made with sour cream, nobody used oil in those days, because the only oil available was unrefined sunflower oil. Cucumber salad with sour cream, tomato salad with sour cream, it was so good that I always licked my plate clean. Or even onion salad with sour cream if there was nothing else. We always had sour cream.

Did I have to weed the allotment garden? For sure, but it was fun to go there, even though it was on the other end of the city. It was a pleasure to go for a walk early in the summer to fetch leaf lettuce and radishes. Nearby, just before the cinema, was this silly amusement park which was only open for a very short period. Afterwards, the gates were padlocked, and later still, kids would dig a hole under the fence and mill around in there. You could still swing on the swings because they didn't require electricity. There were only three attractions, boat-like swings, a carousel, and an airplane. Who knows where this marvel originated, why it was there, or why it was abandoned. I would love for the local historians in Paide to look into it. It also interests me how, overnight, a travelling menagerie appeared in Paide. School had already started, it was in the fall, the muddy time of year, when cages with panthers, wolves, and other lesser creatures appeared on an empty lot. There was also a massive hippopotamus, very big and very old, with all of its teeth broken. The sight of that unfortunate hippopotamus opening its mouth and displaying the stumps of its enormous teeth while splashing in a shallow pool is embedded in my memory like an image from a film that has been paused. If only Kusturica had been a boy from Paide! The panther was a proud, black panther, wild and restless in its tiny cage where it barely had room to turn around. Later, it was written in the paper that the panther had died. The cages were in a

circle around the hippopotamus's pool. And people came! They came and gawked, we did too, it didn't occur to anyone then that the animals were being mistreated, although the entire operation appeared wretched and miserable, even to the most callous people.

How did we get to menageries? What do menageries have to do with gardens as such? Yes, today zoological gardens are landscaped and covered with vegetation, but before, they were not. At least not in these parts. I still remember the zoo in Kadriorg, we went there lots of times, and I wanted to see a peacock. I don't know why, but it's birds that I remember, not bears, lions, or camels, rather eagles, cockatoos, pheasants... Garden, by the way, pertains not only to the space inside, but to the fence that surrounds it. You can't have a garden without a fence, or can you? There are no gardens for the animals, only pens. Or at best, enclosed pastures.

On Muhu, there are stone fences, but what lies within isn't a garden, it is a yard. Everything in a farmyard has a purpose. No one is so foolish as to make more work for themselves by planting a flowerbed. Whoever is interested can read all about how the creation of decorative gardens was encouraged during the period of the first Republic of Estonia. I don't know if the ornamental plants in our garden date back to that period of home beautification or from an earlier time, in any event, all the gardens in Muhu follow the same plan and the local denizens haven't changed much of anything. By the side of the house grow the most common wild orange daylilies, the hundred-year-old clumps have grown huge, and half of them have long ago extended their tubers under the foundation. Purple monkshood towers close by, next to the veranda. No one ever said that they were deadly poisonous, and never did it occur to me to put them in my mouth, not them or any other flower, although I've chewed on hay stalks like any normal child. Soapwort grew wherever it wanted, along with white dead-nettles and celandine, which grew as if it had been planted intentionally. You will still find

celandine today growing behind a shed somewhere, even in gardens with waterlogged soil. It's unlikely that the owner is covered in warts, but the knowledge that this plant must be in the garden is somewhere in their subconscious.

Lilacs are of course everywhere, there's just no end to them. Here and there, you see the leggy shoots of tea roses struggling to establish a foothold between the lilacs. And briar roses, a true scourge, how they can shoot up several metres in just one summer and vigorously spread their root suckers far and wide. Gardeners have attempted to eradicate them because of this spreading habit, but they still form a dense thicket along the edges of all the fields. That's it for the ornamental plants! Our peonies and tiger lilies are from a later period. A few years ago, I found an old flower bed with peonies, lilies, and tufts of daffodils, which were buried under the hanging branches of a barberry shrub. Surely they were there before the barberry, but the shrub just grew and grew until it covered everything else. For the past few years, each spring, I've tried to trim the shrub back on the side where it covers the flowers, but the damned thing grows back at an insane rate. By the fall, its branches have once again spread out and have covered everything. Looks like I will have to transplant the peony. It's the earliest variety, a beautiful beet red. But I'm reluctant to re-plant it, because the two peonies of the same type in the big flower bed in the front garden have, for the second year in a row, been infested with root rot, and no matter what remedies I try, they have not recovered. At first, I put down ash, as recommended, and removed all the affected roots and stems, and then covered the roots with sand. This year, one plant was drooping so much that I wasn't able to save a single shoot, even after spraying it with Previcur, a fungicide used to treat mould and mildew diseases.

Behind the house is a big bushy lovage plant which can be used like parsley; a whole row of scabby gooseberries, little, sweet yellow ones and big red ones; a few black currant bushes. Red currants came later, I got them from my aunt's garden. To this day,

I don't eat red currants, nor do the birds. In the end, the berries turn dark red, almost black, and become shrivelled like raisins, but they won't let go of the bush. There used to be some mountain currants growing between the lilacs, I did eat those. In the summertime, red currants were used to make semolina mousse, a handful of berries would be tossed into boiling water, then the semolina was added. Afterwards, sitting on the step, I would whip the berry porridge with a wooden-handled whisk until my hand hurt. Every home had this set: a four-pronged stick for stirring the porridge, a whisk, and a kind of wooden spatula whose function I never did understand. These things were all stored on a wooden shelf on the wall. Just this summer, I threw out the whisk, but I kept the obscure spatula. I think it might have been used for stirring when dyeing woollen yarn. The four-pronged stick is lost. My daughter gave me a new electric whisk as a gift, but it's yet to be used to make semolina mousse or any kind of mousse.

There is a thicket of raspberries, neglected and overgrown with weeds. You must really have a craving for raspberries to venture into there. Of course I did, and was lucky to get half a milk pail of wormy berries. To get rid of the worms, the berries are poured out onto a plate of sugar, and the worms, who are gluttons for anything sweet, will be coaxed out. In the course of garden maintenance, naturally on Mother's initiative, certainly not mine, the raspberry bushes disappeared. All brushwood had to be cleared out, at least that was the idea, and here and there we succeeded. For a time. This year, I purchased a new raspberry plant, only one. I am, namely, the kind of gardener who will buy only one of anything. All gardening experts start by saying that you should buy only a few varieties but plant them en masse, as this achieves a peaceful and harmonious unity and makes a strong visual impact. With full knowledge, I willfully ignore this advice. That raspberry plant is still languishing in the wash basin where I left it, still alive in its tiny pot without a drop of water, waiting for over a month. I plant all flowers immediately, the

same day that I get them, no matter the weather. Last spring, the day my bare-root roses arrived, it was three degrees outside with heavy, wet snow coming down. I didn't let that stop me, I even put on a hat, which I never do, and as is fitting and proper, got them all into the ground.

With a dung heap in front of the smithy, a thicket of plum trees in the centre of the yard, and scrap iron littering the periphery, the yard appeared boundless. Until only recently, I thought of this yard as gigantic. Now I'm thinking that if I had a riding tractor, the grassy meadow could become part of the yard. (I might as well have used Google to look up heart attack symptoms since I feel a peculiar tightness in my chest. Of course you need acres and acres of yard!) There were all kinds of nooks and crannies. To get to the hay shed on the other side of the plum thicket was like embarking on a journey. At that time, the ruins of the old house were still standing in the yard with some doors attached, but with lots of openings for the foolhardy to crawl into. Stinging nettles grew in abundance, along with nutritious orach, as tall as a man. Not many were brave enough to crawl through this dense tangle. Perhaps in the early spring, but I wasn't in Muhu then. I was almost always there only in the summertime.

I have some photographs from just such an early spring. I was no longer a child, Mother had already moved to Muhu permanently, and it was time to prune the apple trees. In one of the photos, I'm up in a tree, and because of that photo, I seem to feel that I never again cut back apple trees. To be sure, we did nothing but saw away at the trees. Still, the two old apple trees in the centre of the yard have grown so big that there isn't much you can accomplish with a ladder and a hand saw anymore. Nor do I even want to. There are so few shade trees left in the yard. The apple trees in the back were pruned a bit this year and the year before last. Well, not just a bit, quite a lot actually, and for that reason, they are now merrily sending water sprouts skyward. They're so old, you could literally push one of them over by hand. The trunk is rotten on the inside, yet it still has a few branches. It's the well-known

Treboux Sämling, an Estonian variety, with apples that look like a lamb's nose. A piece of rope dangles from one of the branches, who knows how long it's been there. It's always getting caught in the mower, but I won't take it down. That's right. The rope stays.

The second photo is of the ruins of the old house, of a doorway that opens onto the blue sky. To me, this photo is as beautiful as a postcard, but Mother didn't like that I took a picture of that tumbledown old house, she wanted to get rid of those old ruins, come hell or high water. And she did, too. I feel that I should try to sketch a diagram that shows how things used to be, how they were during Mother's time, and the changes that I have made. Essentially, the same thing has happened like in homes everywhere. Wherever possible, walls were taken down to create an open concept living room, filling the entire space with the stench of boiled cabbage. Some of the more modern homes even have a bathtub in the bedroom. The same thing has happened with the garden. Everything that once divided and defined a space is gone. Over time, most of the bigger trees have been cut down, lilac hedges have been eliminated, brushwood done away with, pits left from the ruins filled in, farm machinery taken to scrap metal, and two buildings are no longer there. Still standing are the storage shed, smithy, homestead, and a well. The storage shed still looks like it always has, because no one has tampered with it too much. The smithy looks the same from the outside, although its original function has long ago been replaced. After the blacksmiths were gone, animals were kept here. For the longest time, I tried to figure out, where were the animals while the forge fires blazed? Obviously, they were kept in the threshing room of the old farmhouse.

Of course, the well also looked very different back then, with a wooden curb and a well pole. There were lilac bushes behind the well along the stone wall, just as today, and then another row along the wall of the old house, forming a kind of lilac tunnel. An outdoor kitchen was hidden inside the lilac tunnel, really nothing more than an old iron stove plate placed on top of a stack

of bricks and a really tall metal chimney. I wonder if the sauna chimney is the same metal pipe? I don't remember what was cooked in this outdoor kitchen, possibly it was only used to heat water for washing during hot weather, but no, I do recall that potatoes were cooked here. There was a stump in front of the mouth of a stove where it was fun to sit and feed the fire, this was often my job. One of the best places on the entire farmstead. I should have kept an iron stove plate or two when the stove was demolished, but I would still not have been able to find so many lilacs. I tell you, it's entirely possible, that after much deliberation, owners of open concept kitchens will once again build walls between the rooms, gardeners will allow lilacs to grow wild, they'll source new damson plum trees to create a dense plum thicket, and they will muse about dung heaps. Where there was a wide, grassy lawn, there will once again be a forest, like in the area that we used to mow near Sonni. Apple trees lost in the forest, stone walls meandering between the trees, and sweet woodland strawberries growing in the thick grass are the only markers of a former farm. An interesting fact: the woodland strawberry belongs to the order *Rosales*, the family *Rosaceae*, and the subfamily, *Rosoideae*.

[pp 38—42]

An artist I know recently shared pictures on social media of flowers she had drawn, forget-me-nots, and the like, and said that she was thinking of becoming a flower artist. It's the only remaining art genre that expresses the simple and honest truth: "flowers are beautiful". You can say that you don't like roses, tulips, or carnations. That's another matter. But you can't question a flower's integrity. Who hasn't felt, when looking at a flower, that such beauty simply isn't possible in this wicked and evil world. It makes you think, is this not the work of that powerful and unknown force that created the world and left us this tiny sliver of paradise, which, to the best of our ability, we cultivate and deplete in equal measure?

My Muhu garden is beginning to look like a small pet cemetery. It's full of black metal plant markers and all manner of wooden sticks poking up from the ground, marking the spot where something has been planted. Right now, everything is still leafless and bare; only the scilla are in bloom, and the entire yard is blue. I've dragged an old kitchen table with legs, coincidentally painted the same colour blue, out into the garden. It's what I use for sawing and where I keep paint cans. With its blue legs, the table blends in with the blue of the flowery ground cover, and its dilapidated construction befits the surroundings perfectly. Every morning I get up, and after I've had my coffee and a cigarette, I take a round of the garden. I stop at each plant and observe its swelling buds. With my Japanese garden shears in my pocket, I look to see if there are any dead branches to snip away. All the roses are now in the ground, all 26 of them. For three straight days, I dug holes like a madwoman, unearthing rocks from the

holes, because once I've put my shovel into the ground and declared, "here there shall be a rose", then I won't stop at anything, even rocks the size of boulders. In this way, I can spend several hours digging a single hole.

By the evening, I'm exhausted but happy.

Of course, I'm plagued by doubts — what will happen when they grow really big? It's one thing to see a picture of a field of roses in some Museo Giardino, it's another thing to see such madness on a farmstead where hay was once made for cows.

Then I console myself by saying, but look at the traditional knitted Muhu blankets adorned with inlaid flowers. The knitters didn't hold back, they used all the colours in the world and every flower known to them. Maybe this mass planting of riotous, multi-coloured roses is my little piece of cultural heritage.

Besides, what's there to worry about if not the constant threat from wind, cold, rain, sun, snowless winter, dry weather, and countless harmful insects? May worry be my constant companion! And back pain. Whether from heaving those rocks or perhaps something else, but I managed to acquire back pain that lasted the entire winter and twice compelled me to see a chiropractor. For three months I couldn't sit at all, I could only stand or lie down. I cleared the drugstore shelves of Icy-Hot back pain patches, I took Voltaren by the handful, and applied various deep-relief gels and salves. Those who know better always say, "mind your age". My friend claims that whenever she goes to see her family doctor, no matter the reason, the advice she always gets is to mind her age. That's why I didn't go to see a doctor, because I didn't want to be told to mind my age. My friends (even younger friends, because they, too, have had back problems) have recommended doctors, charlatans, physical exercises, and other tips from their arsenals. Chiropractor number 1 was a mild-mannered man. He declared that I carried a lot of tension in my back. He poked and prodded but did no harm, and at the end of the session asked, expectantly, if my back felt better. I didn't notice any difference and answered guardedly that perhaps I would

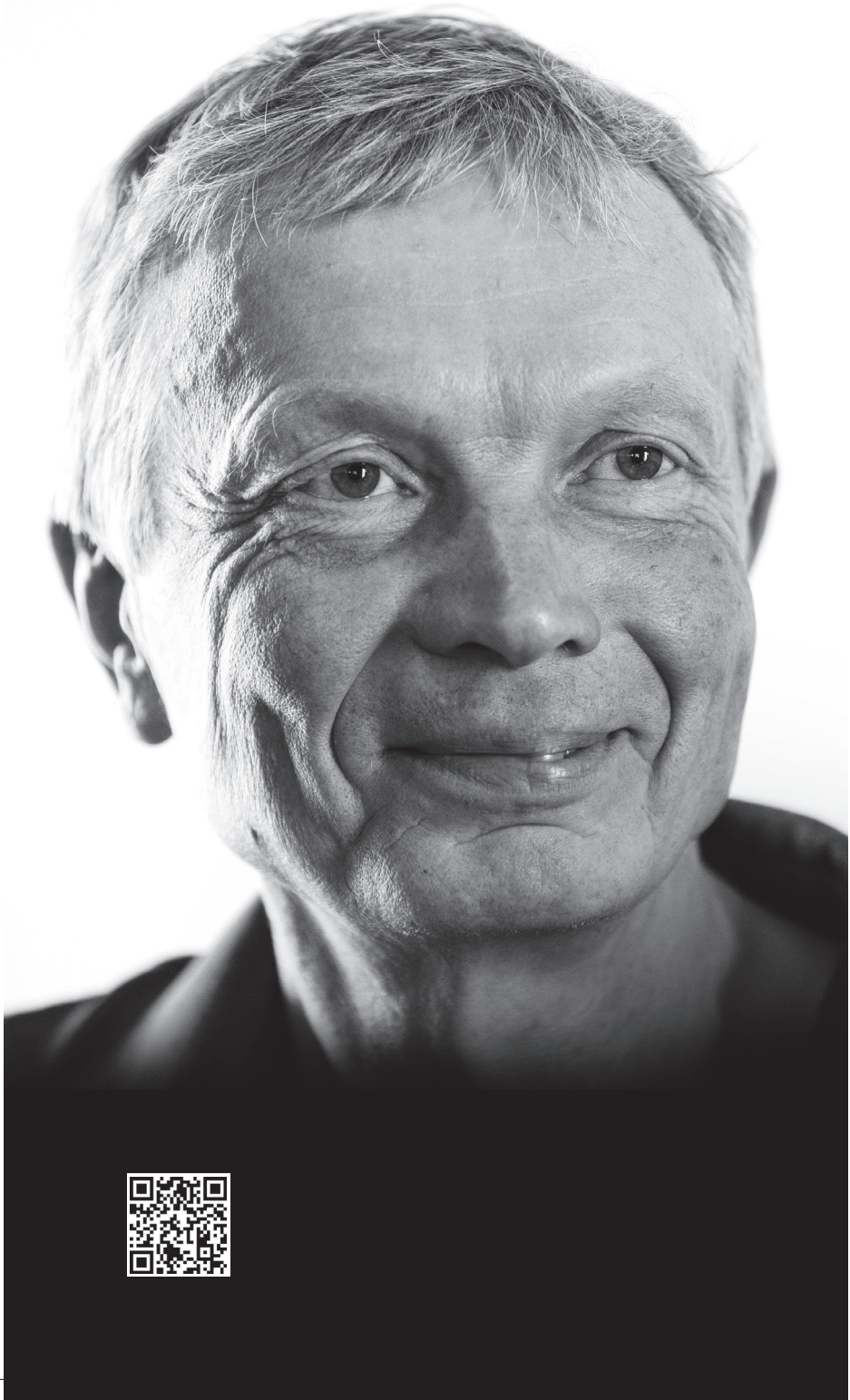
begin to feel some relief later. Chiropractor number 2, on the other hand, was a savage man with the vibes of an escaped convict. He started by photographing his victim, and pointed out just how ghastly and sloppy my posture was, how one shoulder was higher than the other, "It comes from your sleeping position", he attested. He said that my pelvis was out of alignment and that my legs are not the same length, but he can fix all that if only I commit to regular sessions. Next, he had me sit and said that, as a rule, people sit all wrong, on their pelvic bones. They should sit more on their buttocks and then lengthen through the spine. He just prattled the whole time, explaining what he was doing and why, but I held my body stiff as a rod. "Relax, loosen up!" At the end of the session, he took out some kind of electrical device, which he used to jolt my muscles. It's possible that, in addition to chiropractic treatment, I also received mild electric shock treatment to improve my mental state, because, naturally, there's a theory that says that back pain comes from great stress, which doesn't surprise me. As a result of this stimulation, for a week, flashes of pain shot through my head, coming at completely irregular intervals, sharp, stabbing, simply horrible. Pain medication didn't help, and I was getting quite angry, because if there's one thing that I don't suffer from, it's headaches. Eventually, they disappeared, as did my desire to go back to the bone cracker.

Stay healthy, fellow gardeners! Diligent gardeners can also be beleaguered by knee pain. Every time I've been on my knees too long on the cold, wet ground, I feel a kind of buzzing sensation. For a while, I felt a similar tingling in my right hand, and it was hard to move my fingers. I don't know if the gardening shears are to blame or if it's from hunching over the computer. Both can wreak havoc on your wrists. What else? You can forget about beautiful hands and feet. Despite wearing gardening gloves and goloshes, a gardener's hands and feet will always be dirty. Somehow the soil penetrates deeper layers of the epidermis, and only by filing with a rasp can you get rid of the dirty layer. A gardener's equipment should include a pumice stone, a

foot file, a nail brush, a heel rasp and a sole scraper, or whatever these things are called. Hand cream should be kept right next to the gardening shears and gloves, but no matter how much you put on, your paws will still be raw, rough, and dry. I, for one, have more than just one kind of hand cream. I have tubes of these things all over the place, cheap Russian creams, lotions from the drugstore, even some masks bought in a moment of desperation, which were supposed to work miracles but didn't. Looking meaningfully down at one's toes in the middle of the day, the gardener thinks perhaps tonight I'll soak my feet, but come nightfall, she's too tired. It seems that I only attempt to more or less clean myself up before a trip to the city. I don't know why, in the city, I have the garden at Pääsküla to save.

Away from the garden, you can always tell a dirt diva by her Crocs tan. Her feet are white all the way down to the soles of her feet. Tanned, brown skin begins as a sharp line just before the anklebone.

Translated by TIINA OTEMA

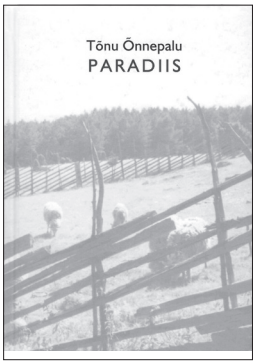


TÕNU ÕNNEPALU
(1962)

PARADISE

In his seven-day writing cycle, the author assumes the role of God, who created Paradise as a model of a safe world, which is nevertheless already lost or about to be. It does not matter that a place named Paradise actually exists on the edge of Estonia. A very poetic and personal book, yet not a diary.

Translations: Finnish, Russian



Tõnu Õnnepalu
PARADIIS
Varrak 2009, 196 p.

ROADS LEADING IN AND OUT – THE LOVE OF PARADISE

And by evening, it is sunshine again. And the wind is warm at once. And below the window, one pretty summer tortoiseshell butterfly came to a dandelion flower to warm its wings. With that soft rain, I myself felt bored. And that is good. The fact that I felt it. For it brought to mind all the boredom of the days in paradise. And there was a lot of that.

Yes, but why? Why can't we start to be satisfied with what we have?

But I am satisfied now. Satisfied that I can be here these seven days. It's a long time. There's plenty of time to feel and think.

Yet before, in the rain that was not really falling, I went for a walk along that road that leads from the gate here and which is one of the roads leading out of Paradise.

For there were four of those roads. The crossroads was in front of the gate on the seaward side, and one road went south from there, another went through the yard and the forest gate to the north (but went around the garden), and the other two led east and west.

The eastward road went past the Allika gardens and up to Aafrika and from there went on to the big highway. But before the Russians built the main highway, that was the main road leading out of Paradise. They conveyed those church people I was speaking about along it, the dead were carried off, and boys went yonder into the wide world. And now people used that road by which you left Paradise, by cycle or by car, for it was the most direct road if you were thinking of going onto the highway, into the wider county, and everywhere.

But for going by bus, you took the north road, which led from the forest gate straight to the Paradise bus stop and post-boxes. If you went on an early bus and it was winter, you certainly had to have a torch with you, because the spot where the road sinks from the forest gate into the forest was very dark. For the branches of the old birches had grown over the road, and you couldn't even see where the road went by a strip of lighter sky, and you could easily end up in the blueberry bushes and heather feeling your way on foot. Further on, though, there was no problem, for there were the pines, and there was always a bright line of road visible between their branches.

And actually, this road led on up from the highway, past the post-boxes and onward over the sandy knolls out to the sea to the north. It was a beautiful road, covered in sand and pine twigs. I went by it a couple of times, wanting to bring a horse from Hirmuste. For there was a part of Paradise for horses: in exchange, you had to make hay for the horses. But later on, I didn't go back for the horse because I didn't get used to all the working

with horses, and the horse, called Miku, was fat and capricious, as not much was ever done with him. Mostly, he just stood alone, grazing on the Hirmuste land, and grew a bit vicious from the solitude. A horse is not created to stand alone on a pasture.

The road to the south led, of course, to the seashore and ended at the Russian jetty. But before that, the little border guards' road turned left towards Mustana and Nirvaana, though it did not exactly lead all the way there — only as far as the last signal tower made of white silicate brick on the Koulu Spit, about a kilometre before Nirvaana.

But this road too had, in its time, led out of Paradise, since the boats sat on the shore and from there one went to sea, but that is a time I haven't seen. They say that big timber boats often came to Paradise on raiding trips, and rowing boats were taken out to them from Koulu Forest and Härjana Forest and other forests loaded with firewood or sleepers. There were always large piles of wood and sleepers on the shore, however, as well as the boats of course, which were simply pulled up to the dunes. There has never been a bridge there because the storms and the spring thaw would have swept a bridge away anyhow. The sea gets deep very sharply there — you just push a boat out from the shore, and off you go.

The Russian stone jetty, though, which was supposed to be turned into a harbour, remained half-made and disintegrated. The construction was mainly done in the spring of 1941, and it was to be one of the Estonian bases built under the agreement, but there wasn't much agreement and not much Estonia left. But anyway, the Paradise harbour was supposed to be one of those bases. Even so, the residents of Paradise were not driven out, and their houses were not pulled down, as happened to the people of Ristna, where a base really was built, one that existed even in my own time, the time I'm telling you about. The Detector, they called it. What it really was, who knows. And by the time you could get to see it, the 'detectors' were being taken off to Russia.

But below Paradise, on the shore, they began building the

harbour and stones were brought in for the jetty. This was done by men from Paradise and other villages, and men and women came from as far away as Viljandi county, and a lot of money was paid for this transportation of rocks. Some of them got more money than they've seen in a lump sum to this day. The smart people were the ones who didn't save the money but spent it immediately, say, by pouring it down their throats because it was soon to lose its value. As all money will do one day, at least here in this country.

According to Endel, the Mardirahva sauna has been a warehouse where butter-boxes inscribed "Estonian Brand Butter" had been stored for the use of the harbour builders. And this warehouse was guarded by a former prisoner, a convinced communist, who did not believe that a Soviet power could arrest or persecute anyone without reason.

And, in fact, the people were quite satisfied with this generously paid and well-fed harbour-building work from the new government. Yet only one section of the jetty was completed, and even that was largely carried away by the last great January storm, which changed much of the shoreline of Paradise as well.

And during the building of the harbour, temporary barracks were built in the forest, and dances were held there on Saturday evenings, where you could go dancing with a Russian soldier. The girls from Pähkla were very keen on going dancing at the "barracks", at least according to Helmi, who, of course, didn't go there herself. She was, after all, the lady of the great Hilltop Farm in Paradise. For Hilltop Farm had always been the biggest in Paradise, and by the end of the Tsarist era, was paying the manor 71 roubles a year in rent, whereas Mardi and Mihkli each paid 62 roubles and 16 kopecks, and the lowest rent came from Allika, 14 roubles and 30 kopecks. Where could they get the rent from?

But, dances or no dances, the harbour remained incomplete, for then the war came, and after the war, the construction was not resumed. Yet that was just when the fate of Paradise hung by a thread. The name they gave it then was "evacuation". Helmi

knew that word as well as the phrase "Gulf of Bothnia". For Helmi and Eduard and all the other residents of Paradise were "evacuated". They were ordered to leave their homes, take their things and move wherever they could, at least five kilometres to the east. And their houses were occupied by soldiers and officers. All their land was due to be turned into a military area, a big base. And so, Paradise would have been wiped off the face of the earth and I would never have come to live here or see everything that I've seen. And the people of Paradise would have had to end their days among strangers.

For not much was going to be left of those houses. Even in that one winter that the "evacuation" lasted, the soldiers managed, they say, to burn up a large number of the gardens and gates of Paradise, and on his return, Eduard had to start building new gardens and making new gates.

Yet Paradise was not wiped from the face of the earth; it survived. The evacuation ended and evidently the supreme command found that such a large base was not necessary after all and the local population did not constitute a particular threat to national security. It was thenceforward only forbidden to go to sea from the shores of Paradise, and the fishermen of the Fishermen's Collective had to embark from Hirmuste or, later, Kalana harbour, which was built up, large, and imposing, with a broad concreted quay, before it was dropped — for it turned out to be too far from the land and too dangerous from the sea.

But now, in the time I am talking about, the westward road led to that abandoned harbour and to the shop where Liidia held sway and distributed goods in short supply to those she favoured. And the west road also led to the airport. That was a nice road too. And the environs of the airport, together with Laasi Kusti's abandoned hut and the terminal bus stop and the turning-place at the harbour and the abandoned harbour itself with its crumbling quay — these were altogether quite like a separate place from Paradise. There it seemed as though people were simply living their lives, and it was more open to the outside world,

even though the harbour was now a dead end. But at least you could ring from the airport. And on days when the shop was open, people came shopping, and even soldiers from the Detector were allowed to shop there.

For Paradise was always so quiet and secluded. And strangely enough it is still to this day, when all other places have changed, it has become even more quiet and secluded.

But I don't know why we stay in one place and not another, why we stay with one person while another doesn't do anything for us. I have thought that it's because we have something to learn from them. From that place or that person.

And I still don't know to this day, though I've tried and tried to find out, what lesson I was to learn from staying in Paradise. And it is over? Or did I get away before the end of the lesson and have been "stuck" ever since?

Ultimately, what we learn from people is how to love. For what else is there? Do you know? I think it's the same for a place. The love of a person and the love of a place is much the same. And neither of them is ever simple. Isn't it the case that if you really know how to love, if you are free to love and no longer fear anything, then there is not much else to worry about? Isn't that the wisdom of the whole world? And even the wisdom of the angels and the heavens?

Well, I don't know. Sometimes, on the evening bus, there were soldiers from the Detector who were travelling to the penultimate stop, where they would go from the crossroads to their unit and the barracks. Once in early spring, when the sun was setting just as the bus set off so that the bus would arrive at its destination in full darkness, there were two young soldiers sitting in the back seat. They were leaning on each other and soon fell asleep, and in their companionship, there was so much simplicity and unpretentiousness. Such a kind of childlike innocence, even though it was the companionship of adults, that I thought: why am I not capable of that? Or why has it not fallen to my lot?

But what is our lot? To love the one you have been given to love

to the end. Yes, to the end. With Paradise, I gave up halfway, as with so much else. I escaped. For the love of Paradise seemed too tremendous to me. It would have demanded too much: everything, my whole life up to the hour of death. But what remains for me?

But should there be anything for oneself?

There shouldn't be. You have everything you need anyway. And yet there is always that fear. Fear of going without, of being too late, of being left out. That life is passing by while you go on loving your empty and silent Paradise, and all opportunities are slipping away. For everyone has opportunities in life, don't they?

At least that is what we have been taught. And that opportunities are in the big cities. For opportunities are other people. Opportunities ought to be exploited…

And so I, too, left Paradise by the northern gate, by the forest gate, early in the morning while it was dark, to catch the first bus and travel to the big city. Yes, in Paradise it was easy to think of even Tallinn as a big city. But having got there, it was what it had always been. What it is. For me, it has not changed much since then. I still recognise it immediately: a spring evening at the corner of Karja Street and Freedom Square, where the flower-sellers are packing up their left-over daffodils and catkins, and people hurry past them, each one with their own troubled life that they carry with them, into the twilight, to the bus stop and onto the bus. What is your Paradise to those people?

And you don't really have anywhere to go. There is one number you don't dare ring for fear of being disappointed. It is so simple to connect people together. We have made it unnecessarily terribly complicated. If you know how to love yourself and your own, then you have everything, and if not, then you have nothing. It's just that nobody is taught this anywhere.

And if the restrictions opened up and an opportunity came, I went out of the forest gate again and along the northern road to the bus stop to catch the early morning bus and go to an ever bigger city, which I had never seen, but of which I had read a lot and for which I had big hopes.

When I got to Paris for the first time, it was winter, and the weather was cold. I had no money at all. Yet I did have enough to be able to try out something I had dreamed of: sitting in cafes. In books, you meet somebody in a cafe. I didn't meet anyone. But I didn't think for a moment that the books could be lying. The fault must be on my side somehow. For why was it so? So many faces and not a single face, so many bodies — mostly — and none of them near mine. So many souls in people's eyes, and not a single soul.

One evening toward the end of January, and probably at quite a late hour, since I often used to wander around until late at night, not wanting to go back to my stopping place and admit yet another defeat to myself — one late evening hour in late January my wanderings took me to the corner of the Place de la République, where evidently I was going to give up after all and turn back for "home". My stomach was empty, and my feet were tired. Everyone who has been there will know the fatigue of a strange city. But for a moment it can make the mind alert. A sort of light indifference strikes you, and you stay to stare at a very brightly lit counter in front of a big fish restaurant there on the street corner, where oysters and other seafood have been put outside, with lemons, some salmon, and glistening ice. Looking at it there, or rather staring without really seeing anything, I was suddenly in Paradise. Yes, I was back there, and everything was as before: my shabby north-facing room, the west wind shaking the rafters of the old house, the darkness, the silence, the endless soughing of the forest, that marvellous happiness where there is no one else and yet you are not really alone.

There on that street corner I was so happy that I had my Paradise.

And soon enough I went back. I got off the bus by the post-boxes. I smelt the scent of the pines and wet sand and moss in the darkness. And the next evening, I invited Aiki and Anton to drink tea because I was itching to offer them the Calvados that I had bought with my pennies, for that custom of "foreignness"

(because it still existed then, that gathering around things brought from abroad, the distribution of gifts) and put that Patricia Kaas cassette on. And dream of Paris.

For it is so easy to do that here. In the accustomed way.

Isn't it strange, my dear friend, that you can't get into Paradise, but Paradise gets into you, and then you carry it everywhere with you, yes, that terrible Paradise, where there is no one anymore, but which would be someone itself.

And ultimately, that is the one that chooses whom you will meet because they, too, must somehow learn to love that barren and distant land, that lonely spot that is in you — Paradise.

Translated by CHRISTOPHER MOSELEY






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