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INTRODUCTION
BY WEST CAMEL, EDITOR

Many of you picking up this, our Baltics edition of The Riveter magazine, will find within these pages much that is new: reviews of books by unfamiliar authors; essays and articles about literature you may not have previously come across; poetry you’ve not read or heard performed. I too – before I began the process of commissioning and editing the content for this edition – hadn’t encountered many of the books and writers The Baltics Riveter covers.

This is the main reason why the London Book Fair Market Focus exists – to showcase writers from around the world to those of us in the book trade and the reading public who may not have heard of them before, and thereby enhancing our literary knowledge.

And this is exactly why we at the European Literature Network publish The Riveter magazine, and why we use each edition to focus on the literature of a different country, region, language or language group.

What I’ve learned in the process of editing The Baltics Riveter – and you will too as you read it – is that, while their books and poetry might be new to many in the English-speaking world, Lithuania, Estonia and Latvia all have strong and long literary traditions, which have survived despite attempts to eradicate, censor and suppress both their literature and the languages it is written in.

What’s more, I have learned that literature in the three Baltic countries is currently thriving. You’ll see the evidence here: in the series ‘We. Latvia. The 20th century’, several titles from which we feature; in the flourishing of modern Estonian writing filmmaker Imbi Paju discusses; in the reflections on history Lithuanian writers are producing; and even in the small by vibrant Livonian literary scene translator Chris Moseley describes.

We hope we reflect as much as we can of this literary energy and enterprise within these pages. And, aided by our guest editors, London Book Fair’s three Authors of the Day – Kristina Sabaliauskaitė, Nora Ikstena and Mihkel Mutt – and by all our contributors, we hope you’ll no longer regard the literature from the three Baltic countries as something new, but instead as simply fresh and enticing writing.

West Camel is a writer, editor and reviewer. He is the Editor of The Riveter magazine.
British Council is excited to present the Baltic Countries as the London Book Fair Market Focus in 2018. We have collaborated with the London Book Fair for twelve years on the Market Focus project, devising new ways to showcase writers from around the world, but this is the first time that we are showcasing three countries. We have worked closely with the Estonian Literature Centre, the Writers’ and Translators’ House, Latvia, and the Lithuanian Culture Institute to bring together some of the best writers from each country to appear at the Book Fair and be involved in many other projects taking place throughout the year.

From Estonia we have four writers. Our Author of the Day is Mihkel Mutt, who covers many different genres and who also translates into Estonian. Rein Raud is a public intellectual, and a novelist and poet who has been compared to Umberto Eco. Maarja Kangro writes poetry that meditates on death and trauma, and her short stories explore injustice and solidarity. Finally, Andrei Ivanov’s experiences in a Danish refugee camp inform his book *Hanuman’s Journey to Lolland*.

Our four Latvian writers include Author of the Day Nora Ikstena who has been receiving lots of attention since the publication of the English-language translation of her book *Soviet Milk* by Peirene Press earlier this year. Inga Ābele’s books offer a sympathetic exploration of the lives of the dispossessed, while Kārlis Vērdiņš’ poetry focuses on the difficulties of growing up in a changing world. Luīze Pastore is the only children’s writer among our Market Focus authors, and her book *Dog Town* is published by Firefly Press during London Book Fair week.

Lithuania’s Author of the Day – more familiar to London audiences, as she has lived here for many years – is Kristina Sabaliauskaitė. Her epic novel series, *Silva Rerum*, has been lauded in Lithuania as the greatest literary event of recent years. Our other Lithuanian authors include Tomas Venclova, who has had an incredibly illustrious career, belonging to that generation of influential Eastern European literary figures who have given clear poetic form to the experience of totalitarian regimes. Undinė Radzevičiūtė is notable for her dark humour and her exploration
of the links between Eastern and Western cultures. Finally, Alvydas Šlepikas’s novel *In the Shadow of Wolves*, which was the most-read novel in Lithuania at the time of its publication, tells, for the first time in fiction, the story of the ‘wolf children’ – orphans who came from Germany to Lithuania after WWII to work.

What is clear from this list is the range and variation of literature from Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. Every writer in the list has worked in several different genres and distinguished themselves in every field.

London Book Fair audiences therefore have treats in store. It’s important to remember, however, that the Market Focus doesn’t stop here, but continues throughout the year. Keep an eye on the British Council website (literature.britishcouncil.org) for further opportunities to enjoy the best of Baltic literature.

Harriet Williams is a Literature Programme Manager at the British Council. She has worked on the Market Focus Cultural Programme for four years, and prior to this worked at the British Museum and London Review Bookshop.
Over the past few months I’ve had the great pleasure of immersing myself in the literature and landscape of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, in preparation for this special edition of The Baltics Riveter and in order to meet the writers attending London Book Fair this April, where twelve writers, four from each country, are guests of the 2018 Market Focus programme. As I write this, I’m on the last leg of my Baltic tour – in Lithuania, at the Vilnius Book Fair, where I have interviewed Lithuania’s ‘Fab Four’ for national TV. What a thrill to meet Tomas Venclova, the great poet, dissident and essayist, friends with Brodsky, Miłosz and Akhmatova. Poets are heroes in this part of the world: they came up with the revolutionary slogans and their statues adorn town squares. There’s a street in Vilnius called ‘Literature Street’ – a true homage to the past. In the present too, across the Baltics, there’s some glorious poetry being penned and performed, but the greatest fictional flourishing is of memoir, autobiographical fiction and historical novels. There’s a real plethora of novel-writing – some experimental and abstract, some graphic, plot-driven and romantic; but, unlike in the UK, there are fewer short stories, crime novels and science fiction. Maybe the Baltics have endured enough shortened-life stories, crime and dystopia in their past. Today they are in expansive mode.

My first trip to this region was to Tallinn in the early 1990s for the BBC, to report on the changes after Estonia won independence from the Soviet Union. All three countries share this history of change: periods of independence alternating with occupation and struggle. After being thrown together for so long under the Soviet yoke they are today successfully redefining their distinct literatures and languages. Their resilience and resurgence are breathtakingly impressive and moving – and ongoing, as I’ve witnessed when walking their restored streets and hearing their stories.

Which brings me to our Baltics Riveter, a tribute to some of those stories emerging from this new era of freedom. The three London Book Fair Authors of the Day are outstanding, or as one colleague expressed it, ‘the Baltics equivalents of JK Rowling’, but do you know their names? We hope you
will after reading this magazine, because not only have we persuaded Kristina Sabaliauskaitė, Nora Ikstena and Mihkel Mutt to be our guest editors but we are publishing extracts and reviews of their novels. Thank you so much to them and to all our riveting reviewers, writers, translators and to our cover designer, Laima Matuzonytė, who won a Baltics-wide competition organised by Pop-Up Projects. In fact, the illustrators I’ve met on my Baltics tour have blown me away. From the outset I have conceived The Riveter as a showcase for artwork as well as literature, so long may such collaborations continue.

We also owe the amazing women running the Institutes of Culture and Literature of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuanian great gratitude for their financial and literary support. They are, indeed, all women and are all game-changers in their countries.

Thank you to my very own resident European Literature game-changers, Anna Blasiak and West Camel. And finally, thank you to all the bakers on my Baltics tour! This is the Rye Bread Belt of Europe. Not only have I discovered new, nourishing literature, I’ve tasted some of the finest bread in my life and bought as many kilos of bread as books!

Rosie Goldsmith (aka Rosie the Riveter) is Director of the European Literature Network and Riveter-in-Chief.
Our historical use of Polish is the reason Poles and Lithuanians quarrel over who owns the Lithuanian-born Mickiewicz and Miłosz, who both wrote in the language. While I prefer the word ‘share’, as great talents cannot be ‘owned’, our debate raises a philosophical question: what is more important – content or form? We can probably speak of Lithuanian literature – Lithuanian in its content, outlook and sensitivity, such as The Issa Valley by Miłosz or Promise at Dawn by Gary, but written in languages historically used in the country. For example, after the union with Poland in 1569, methods of communication needed to develop and adapt swiftly, leading the nobility to absorb both church Latin and Polish. Thus our first international best-seller, Lyricorum libri tres by Maciej Kazimierz Sarbiewski (published in 1625 and popular in Britain at the time), was in Latin.

With the Enlightenment, however, the interest in the public use of the archaic and sonorous Lithuanian language grew, and in 1775 ‘The Seasons’ – the first peasant epic poem in Lithuanian – was written (in classical hexameter) by Kristijonas Donelaitis. Unfortunately, in 1795, the Polish-Lithuanian state was partitioned, Lithuania became part of the Russian Empire, and the language became so essential to Lithuanian identity and resistance that in 1865 Russia banned it completely, along with the Latin alphabet. However, our love of our literature and language was such that...
we started smuggling in Lithuanian books. At approximately 3,000 titles, and five million copies, this was a mass, cross-class movement.

When the ban was finally lifted in 1904, and then Lithuania declared itself independent in 1918, our creativity was unleashed in an eruption of great novels and grand plays – symbolist, expressionist, realist and futurist literature. We seemed to be relishing Lithuanian words and our new-found freedom of expression.

The Soviet occupation after WWII brought a different kind of suppression: the language was permitted, and later – slyly, and in keeping with Soviet ‘class-conflict’ ideology – was even encouraged. The concept was weak, though, describing a peasant ‘national identity’ that ignored our sophisticated multicultural heritage. At the same time, there was thorough censorship and content was severely restricted; foreign and most pre-war literature was destroyed or locked away, and anything considered even slightly bourgeois or Western was prohibited. Narrow circles of dissident intellectuals conducted some secret self-publishing, mostly on typed carbon copies, and only the few who escaped to the West could express themselves freely – *The White Shroud* by Antanas Škėma being a notable example. Meanwhile, behind the Iron Curtain, many Lithuanian writers self-censored. Others sought out Aesopic language with which to express their discontent, often choosing poetry as a more ambiguous form, in the process mastering the language’s nuances.

At last, in the late 1980s, dissident literature started reappearing and quickly became a bestselling genre. And since 1990, when we became independent once more, there has been an abundance of genres, styles and experiments with expression.

I, for one, hope that the London Book Fair Market Focus 2018 will prompt many English translations of contemporary Lithuanian literature, giving British readers the opportunity to see the full range of what could now be described as a New Golden Age.

Kristina Sabaliauskaitė

London-based Kristina Sabaliauskaitė is the most widely read Lithuanian author (sales of her books run to hundreds of thousands of copies). Her award-winning four-part historical novel *Silva Rerum* is a bestseller beyond Lithuania’s borders, where it has attracted the admiration of readers, exceptional reviews and was shortlisted for the final of the ANGELUS Central European Literary Prize in 2016.
RIVETING LITHUANIAN RECOMMENDATIONS

FROM GUEST EDITOR, KRISTINA SABALIAUSKAITĖ

The Issa Valley by Czesław Miłosz

Set in the 1920s in Miłosz’s native countryside, this novel depicts the end of the old rural way of life and the painful birth of a new world, with redrawn borders and new identities. A boy, Thomas, comes of age on his grandfather’s estate amid woods, devils, priests and their suicidal mistresses, the ghosts of soldiers, arriviste handmaids, Bolshevik peasants and an impoverished noble family. It is one of those world-literature gems that cannot be summarised; it is pure poetry and philosophy in prose. Just read it.

The Forest of Gods by Balys Sruoga

Sruoga, a Fitzgeraldesque character, was a revered playwright of pre-war Lithuania. In 1943 the Nazis imprisoned him in Stuthoff, but being a polyglot, he survived. He was made a clerk and translator, enabling him to forge orders and thus save lives. The Forest of Gods is his memoir, and proves that a human soul can retain freedom (and black humour) even in a concentration camp. No wonder the Soviets also persecuted him – the book was forbidden for decades and later censored. The uncensored version saw the light of day only in 2005, and it is considered to be the Lithuanian book of the century.

Vilnius Poker by Ričardas Gavelis

Published just before the collapse of the Soviet Union, this novel became a bestseller and a herald of freedom. International critics recently proclaimed it Dostoevsky, Orwell, Kafka and Kundera in one. No; it is Gavelis – a vivisection of homo sovieticus that eclipses all other attempts. In Rashomon style, Vilnius Poker depicts the all-pervading, absurd but powerful, and dehumanising Soviet system. Memories are faked, love is doomed, conscience silent and words deceitful. Its depiction of the sheer banality of evil will send shivers down your spine. And yet at the same time it is a violent manifestation of liberty.
There’s something rather daunting about reviewing a book in its country of origin, and knowing the author personally and the fame she enjoys. Cards on the table: I’m in Vilnius as I write this, know Kristina and have only been able to read extracts from Silva Rerum as it’s not yet published in English. So let’s call this an appraisal rather than a review.

The four Silva Rerum novels were published here in Lithuania between 2008 and 2016. Similar to the ambition and impact of Hilary Mantel’s Wolf Hall, they follow generations of a family of minor gentry across 150 years. They’ve been reprinted several times and have won every prize going. ‘Silva Rerum’ means ‘forest of things’ in Latin but is also the name given to the ‘scrapbook’ popular here in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, filled with family memorabilia such as journal entries, recipes, bills and pictures. For Kristina these are precious records of domestic life rich with ideas and stories. As an academic, art historian and journalist, her research was rigorous. Luckily for us she is also a gifted novelist.

Each Silva Rerum novel features real events; the great floods, wars, fires and plagues taking place in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania from 1659 to 1795 form the backdrop to the Narwoysz family chronicle. In the first novel, the elderly patriarch Jan Maciej lives with his younger wife, Elzbieta, and their precocious ten-year-old twins, Urszula and Kazimierz, on their country estate. Their beloved cat has just died:

‘Urszula was curious to know if life depended on the heart beating or on the fact that a soul resides in the body, while Kazimierz ... was interested in knowing if perhaps it might be possible to dissect Maurycy, since he was after all already dead, and see how everything was arranged inside him.’

The erudite and mischievous narrator – a delightful balance sustained consistently across all four novels – thus lays out the future paths of adult Urszula and Kazimierz: he leaves home for the European metropolis of Vilnius to study, and Urszula to join a convent. Science and religion, body and soul, life and death, love and loss: Silva Rerum’s scope is vast, but you learn and laugh a lot too. War dominates SRII and the
plague kills two-thirds of the population, so how will the family line continue? In SRIII, Vilnius is devastated by two great fires and the Jews are blamed. Mysticism, corruption, mistresses and Judaism are themes here.

The final novel (1770–1795), *Silva Rerum IV*, is dedicated to the ruptures in the family and the country under the Enlightenment and before the partition of Poland and Lithuania. Franciszek Narwoysz, Jan’s great-grandson, is a Jesuit priest, freemason, mathematician and philosopher at Vilnius University. He travels all over Europe, meeting other intellectuals and aristocrats, gathering ideas – and telescopes – to bring home. The light and humour in this opening passage are soon overshadowed by terror and violence:

‘Franciszek used to feel the existence of God most acutely while looking at the starry vault of heaven, and felt the glory of the luminous heavenly bodies, as shameful as it was to confess, but as he remembered from his childhood, best and most sublimely, when relieving his bladder ... and, with the rush of an echoing stream, feeling relief, he lifted his head to the black sky, through which shone, as if through God’s colander, the eternal light of the stars ... In the sky over Lithuania it is the brightest star, it pulsates, twinkles without ceasing as if it were a human heart and just as changeable, it seems, it even changes colour like a heart its affections, we will no longer be here but it will still be there flickering in the heavens.’

In this sublime passage, the sentences are as long as rivers, winding their ornately baroque path across the page, full stops sprinkled like rare stars. Here in Vilnius I can see how fervently Lithuanians love their Baroque interiors, buildings and literature. *Silva Rerum* is baroque: one reason Lithuanians love these novels; but it is also because they reflect the history of turbulence and transformation, clearly resonant today, and for us too in the rest of Europe.

When I visit Vilnius University with Kristina, I see the reading room where Franziskus studied mathematics and the telescopes he brought back from his years in London. For Lithuanians Kristina has brought back to life the creative fervour of a multilingual, multicultural country once so central to Europe, today slowly clawing its way back. No wonder this patriotic page-turner, with its lush language and bodice-ripping nobles, is so popular here in Lithuania. But wouldn’t it be great if we could all read *Silva Rerum*?

*Rosie Goldsmith*
On that hot July day in the year of Our Lord 1659 Kazimierz and Urszula Narwoysz saw death for the first time. Even though death was all around them, the twins, in the tenth year of their lives, looked directly into its grey mutable face for the first time and that confrontation, which lasted but a few moments, it could be said, decided their fate.

Everything had started several weeks before, when their beloved tabby Maurycy died, a well-fed creature, their companion from the cradle who, keeping his claws retracted, like a Stoic, suffered all their pranks with patience. Even their favourite prank where one of the twins would hold it tight, while the other pulled on its tail. Caught unawares, Maurycy obeyed nature and, forgetting the forgiveness of felines to small children, struggling fiercely, would scratch the one holding it. Most often it was Kazimierz who would feel the brunt, since it was Urszula who had the miraculous ability to put on an angelic face and ambush the cat by pulling on its tail; sometimes, amusing themselves, they would tie something that made a noise to its tail and wrap the unfortunate pet up like a babe in swaddling clothes. The last time was when they took things too far: without anyone seeing them and exercising great caution they wrapped Maurycy up and changed their newborn sister lying in her cradle with him. The wet nurse, on seeing the cat wrapped up, began to scream in a voice not her own, while the twins fell around and shrieked with laughter, and later they themselves were screaming in voices not their own while being thrashed, this dangerous prank causing even Jan Maciej Narwoysz to lose his normally unshakeable patience.

One morning Maurycy did not respond to being called with his usual purring and did not slowly emerge from some unexpected corner with his tail raised. The twins, who had spent the better part of half the day looking for Maurycy all over the estate mansion, finally found their tabby friend behind the kitchen building to where the village elder’s Little Jan or Jonelis, to give him his name in the local tongue, had called them. The three of them crouched down, examined him
carefully and prodded Maurycy’s stiff body, locked in death, all hard and unrecognisable, with his mouth slightly agape and in which his sharp teeth were showing eerily. This was not the first time the twins had seen dead animals, not to mention Jonelis, well known for his loops to catch birds and for all kinds of traps to ensnare small creatures, but it was one thing to see a dead mole or a wax-wing which had flown into a window; it was something else entirely to see dear Maurycy, who used to curl up on their blanket to warm their feet, and to see this cold, rigid and unfriendly thing which had come from the world of dead things. From a completely foreign world made up of horrible smells and cold, wax-like surfaces, to which belonged the horror-inducing withered finger of an unknown martyr from Jerusalem with a cracked yellow fingernail, kept in a beautiful gilded and glazed reliquary in the home chapel. Even though the acquired holy relic was cloaked in holiness and respect, as soon as Urszula and Kazimierz saw that yellowed and cracked fingernail, a wave of nausea would rack their bodies, threatening to make them bring up their porridge from breakfast. Now Maurycy also belonged to that world of dead horrors. None of the three children wanted to take Maurycy into their arms so they had to find some suitable rag to wrap the dead cat’s body in. Finally, wrapping him in a remnant of a sack, taking turns, they carried the strangely heavy and rigid creature home, and went directly to the book room, knowing that was where they would find Jan Maciej Narwoysz at this time of day.

The maid, who was sweeping the corners of the antechamber, on seeing the dead cat, predictably began to admonish the children and drive them out, but the voice of their father, who had heard the commotion, spoke over hers. ‘Come in, you little fools!’ He lovingly invited the despondent trio in and temporarily placed the quill in the ink bottle which stood on the table covered with stacks of ledgers and letters. Listening to the account given by the children, interrupting one another, of the cat’s sad end and the circumstances surrounding his discovery, and stroking his short beard, which was becoming white and in the middle of which ran a tuft of dark hair like a badger’s stripe, Jan Maciej Narwoysz paid no attention to a large part of the children’s chattering and looked at the consolation of the sunset of his life – the brown-eyed, full-cheeked prankster twins, healthy and firm like two ripe cherries. Because of their age, they were more suited to being his grandchildren than his children, and Jan Maciej Narwoysz would often think that it was only him coming late to fatherhood that had taught him the patience of the old in responding to the endless questions put him by the twins, and his own days that were numbered and dwindling allowed him to find time for the joys and disappointments of childish discoveries.

Kristina Sabaliauskaitė
Translated by
Romas Kinka

Romas Kinka works as a forensic linguist and a literary translator and finds that the two disciplines complement one another. Born in Lithuania, he has lived in England on and off since the age of six but returns to his motherland every day by translating the work of Lithuanian authors.
Grigory Kanovich is regarded as one of the finest writers on Jewish themes – a giant among both Russian and Lithuanian authors. This 2012 masterpiece has been described as a kaddish (mourners’ prayer) for the shtetl, but it is much more. It is part family history, part eyewitness account, part imagined reconstruction of a world that vanished in June 1941, when the Nazis and their collaborators annihilated every vestige of the Litvaks – the Jews of Lithuania. Above all, it is a majestic, affectionate, totally gripping but unsentimental account of a way of life, the loss of which has made Eastern Europe a lesser place. Other cultures are victims of social and economic ‘progress’: the shtetl was a victim of planned ideological destruction.

*Shtetl Love Story* is in two parts: Book One, set in Jonava in the early interwar period, is the love song of Hirschke’s (Grigory’s) parents; of Mama Hennie patiently waiting for her Shleimke to finish his military service. The other characters all perform their stately dance around Hennie: her mother-in-law Rokha, known as the ‘Samurai in a skirt’ for her sharp tongue, and her long-suffering husband, a cobbler whose mouth seems permanently full of both nails and wise saws. There’s also ‘Almost-a-Jew’, the local policeman, Vincas Gedraitis, who speaks Yiddish as fluently as those he watches over. All these and more are drawn by Grigory Kanovich in sympathetic detail against a backdrop of small-town life that is as vivid as anything in Tolstoy.

*Shtetl Love Song* by Grigory Kanovich 
Translated by Yisrael Elliot Cohen (Noir Press, 2017) 
Reviewed by Max Easterman
In Book Two, Kanovich sings his own love song – of life in the Jonava backwater, as people only become aware at the last moment of the gathering war clouds. The family argues about whether Hirshke should go to the Yiddish or the Hebrew school, while firebrand brother-in-law Shmulik castigates Shleimke for worrying about ‘what is going on in our own souls and heads’ rather than ‘the evil plans of that nutcase Adolph Hitler’.

Kanovich weaves into his narrative the long-held beliefs Jews clung to in a dangerous and unpredictable world. As the banker husband of Hennie’s employer says: ‘For Jews, the future is an unreliable bank; they deposit all their hopes in it and then it turns out to be completely bankrupt’.

And later, as they are warned that the Germans are on the move, Rokha shrugs: ‘Such is our cursed fate – to flee from wherever we were settled to somewhere else from where there’s nowhere else to run.’

Hirshke and his parents ran to the Soviet Union and somehow escaped the Holocaust. As they lie in a hay loft en route, Hirshke reflects on ‘the deep, impenetrable silence … only the pungent, peaceful scent of cut hay and a vision of a world not desecrated either by ungodly hatred or bloodshed’. Revisiting Jonava at the war’s end, he realises that ‘whoever allows the dead to fall into oblivion will himself be justly consigned to oblivion by future generations’.

I am the son of a second generation Litvak. These words and this magnificent novel moved me to realise why my father’s family were the way they were – never forgetting, yet never openly talking about the reality of where they came from and why they left.

To this day, I know only that my grandfather’s shtetl was near Klaipeda, that he was a shopkeeper, spoke little English and wrote none. Were there other relatives who perished in that Lithuanian Holocaust? I have no idea. But now, at least, I do have a vivid, unforgettable picture of how my forebears lived and what they lived for.

Max Easterman

Max Easterman is a journalist – he spent twenty-five years as a senior broadcaster with the BBC – university lecturer, translator, media trainer with Sounds Right, jazz musician and writer.

Grigory Kanovich was born into a traditional Jewish family in the Lithuanian town of Jonava and is one of the most prominent modern Lithuanian Jewish writers. He has written more than ten novels dealing with the vicissitudes of the history of Eastern European Jewry from the nineteenth century to the present day. He is a winner of the Lithuanian National Prize for Culture and Arts.
A shtetl is an Eastern European Jewish township, one of which – Jonava – Grigory Kanovich grew up in during the interwar years. Written in 2012, and now available in English, Shtetl Love Song is his affectionate, gentle and absorbing chronicle of the traditions, relationships, workplaces and landscapes of the Litvaks – the Jews of the Lithuania – whose culture was annihilated by the Nazis and their local collaborators during the Holocaust.

‘The Attack on the Ferry’

At the end of the second day of our retreat we saw the sparkling of a river. From a distance Pinkhas caught sight of a rope extended over the water and a small pine-board ferryboat with a signal bell. The boat was protected by a small iron canopy resembling a boletus mushroom.

From the crumbling slope of the bank, a deserted forest path, covered with wind-fallen branches which protected it from rain, led to the ferry landing.

There was no ferryman in sight.

Our cart descended the slope.

‘Hey, is anybody here?’ our driver shouted.

The sound echoed in the silence. ‘Hey!’

Out of the bushes crawled a sleepy beanpole of a man with rumpled red hair.

‘What are you hollering for?’ he asked, yawning broadly.

‘Are you the ferryman?’ Pinkhas asked, while the peasant yawned.

‘Yes, that’s me,’ the man said.

‘Will you take us over to the other bank?’

‘I will if you pay,’ the ferryman said, thick with drowsiness. ‘Just hand over the gold.’

‘Where are we supposed to get that from?’

‘Jews without gold are not Jews.’ The beanpole covered his mouth with his hand and, pulling up his trousers, headed back to the bushes.

‘Wait!’ shouted Velvl the cobbler, taking the ring off his finger.

‘On one condition; you give me the ring before we go over!’

‘Fine,’ agreed Velvl.

The cart rolled onto the ferry. The beanpole put the ring into the pocket of his creased trousers, pulled the signal bell and, with some creaking, the ferry moved off.

As the ferryman was navigating the rapids, a German fighter plane appeared overhead.

‘It’s heading straight for us,’ Father shouted, looking upwards.
Before he had time to look away, the air was filled with bullets. The plane descended, then ascended.

It seemed as if the pilot was playing a diabolical game with us, aiming not at the people or the horse, but at the rope extended across the river, trying to break it, as if to take pleasure in how the ferry, caught by the current, would be carried away down river. Even as his bullets struck the wooden bottom and the sides of the ferry and the water around it, the German did not stop.

Huddling against the warm bodies of our parents, Mendel and I were afraid to move. Peasants, who were loading their fragrant, dry hay into carts on the other bank, threw down their pitchforks and stared helplessly at the cloudless sky that rained down death.

Finally the pilot succeeded; the loose ferry was carried swiftly by the current and crashed against the opposite bank. The barefoot ferryman lay unmoving in his rolled-up trousers beneath the now-silent bell. A thin stream of blood trickled down his unshaven chin. Pinkhas was squatting before his dead horse, caressing the hair of its mane, which fluttered like the broken strings of a musical instrument.

Recovering from their fright, the peasants ran down the slope to the water, crossing themselves at the sight of the dead man and, without uttering a single word, rushed off to the village. They returned some time later with shovels to bury Pinkhas’s mare in the warm earth. They removed her collar and traces. They would have removed the bridle too, but Pinkhas had tossed it over his own neck before they returned.

‘Perhaps we should take care of him first?’ said my mother, pointing at the ferryman lying nearby while trying to avoid looking at his body.

‘We’ll bury Jonas; he won’t be going anywhere,’ a frail peasant with a bandaged cheek muttered. ‘We’ll bury him when the straw’s gathered. It’s easier to bury a horse than a man; you don’t need to read a burial service for a horse or mourn it. You just take a shovel, dig a pit, cover it over and that’s that.’

With the bridle around his neck, Pinkhas stood at the edge of the large grave and began almost inaudibly, to the sound of falling clay, to recite the kaddish, the memorial prayer.

‘What is he doing?’ asked the pious Esther, wife of the cobbler Selkiner, appalled. ‘God doesn’t allow us to recite kaddish for animals.’

‘Who said I’m reciting kaddish for a horse, Esther? Who said that? Aren’t we all animals? Animals, animals... Domestic, wild, all kinds?’ Pinkhas exclaimed and then said nothing more.

Grigory Kanovich
Translated by Yisrael Elliot Cohen

Yisrael Elliot Cohen taught Russian literature and humanities at the University of Illinois before settling in Israel and working as a translator from Russian into English and as an English-language editor. Currently at Yad Vashem, he is working on The Untold Stories: Holocaust Murder Sites in the Soviet Union.
A boy called Paul and his satisfyingly odd parents live in a tree. On his way home from the baker's one day (he always takes the long way home), Paul meets an orange fox on a swing. And as Paul will soon discover, all the best things in the world are orange.

The fox teaches the boy some valuable lessons about life (which she has learned from her wise old grandfather fox), and before long she's become his best friend. So what will happen to their somewhat unlikely friendship when Paul has to leave town?

The Fox on the Swing is a pleasantly fantastical picture-book story, with sweet lessons about friendship and home; but for me it's really Kiudulaitė's beautiful illustrations – with a gorgeous distinctive palette and lots of lovely eye-catching detail – that make it such a treat and carry the story through to its happy end.

Daniel Hahn

Daniel Hahn is a writer, editor and translator, with some fifty books to his name, including, recently, the new Oxford Companion to Children's Literature.

Evelina Daciūtė is a writer and poet. She is based in Vilnius, Lithuania.

Aušra Kiudulaitė is an illustrator and artist. She lives and works in Lithuania.
In June 1941, Stalin ordered the mass deportation of Lithuanian citizens to remote regions of the Soviet Union. Thousands died in the harsh labour camps, including many women and children. Dalia Grinkevičiūtė was fourteen years old when she was deported with her mother and brother Juozas. They ended up hauling timber in a fish-processing factory on the island of Trofimovsk. In February 1949, Dalia fled with her mother back to Lithuania, where they were forced into hiding.

Throughout these months of relative freedom, Dalia began drafting a memoir detailing the gruelling first year she had spent in exile. She buried her account in a preserving jar in their garden in the city of Kaunas.

Her mother died in May 1950, and Dalia was arrested by the KGB and sent back to Siberia. When she returned to Lithuania six years later, she was unable to find her memoir and later wrote another account that was reproduced and disseminated underground. It wasn't until 1991, after her own death, that the preserving jar was discovered and the papers were sent to the war museum in Kaunas to be conserved and copied. Delija Valiukėnė’s eloquent translation is based on this early memoir written between 1949 and 1950.

*Shadows on the Tundra* is a remarkable account of one girl’s survival against the odds, the appalling conditions she was forced to endure and the shocking inhumanity she witnessed. Shortly after their arrival, Dalia describes how ‘death, along with famine, typhus, lice, scurvy and frigid temperatures, had wormed its way into our ghastly barracks’. When the polar winter arrives they are trapped inside their wretched dwellings, and Dalia watches as the corpses pile up and are left to lie alongside the living.

Dalia is granted a few months at a rudimentary school but is often late as she has to work in the mornings in order to earn her meagre bread rations. Eventually the teacher tells her not to return. The deportees are treated like animals and Dalia poignantly describes them as ‘fleas in harness’ and ‘emaciated nags ... straining at their impossible loads’. They have to haul logs up a hill, which she renames ‘Golgotha, our Calvary’. Despite the hardship, Dalia
can still appreciate ‘the imposing back-
drop of the softly booming Lena delta’
and ‘the milky period of twilight’. It is this
resilience that ultimately saves her.

When spring returns, their condi-
tions improve. Dalia and her mother are
moved to Bobrovsk to gut fish. Despite
the appalling stench, they can now eat
their fill and sleep in yurts. Dalia
captures rare moments of joy, such
as when she finds ways to cheat their
captors – stacking a pile of wood ‘with a
hollow centre big enough to hold three
people’ or fooling their gullible super-
visor by resubmitting yesterday’s stacks.

Shadows on the Tundra is a deva-
stating portrait of human cruelty.
Dalia bears witness to the brutality of
the labour camps but she also reveals an
indomitable spirit that refuses to be
crushed. Her searing tale is unexpect-
edly uplifting.

Lucy Popescu

Lucy Popescu has a particular interest in literary
fiction in translation. She reviews books for various
publications including the Financial Times, TLS and
New Humanist. Her anthology, A Country to Call
Home, focusing on the experiences of young refugees
will be published in June 2018.

Dalia Grinkevičiūtė was born in Kaunas, the former capital of Lithuania. She spent her teenage
years in a Siberian gulag. At twenty-one she escaped and returned to her home country only to
be deported to Siberia again in 1951. She was released five years later, then studied medicine.
Grinkevičiūtė’s writings are now placed firmly in the Lithuanian literary canon.

MAGNETIC NORTH: CONVERSATIONS WITH TOMAS VENCLOVA
(ROCHESTER STUDIES IN EAST AND CENTRAL EUROPE)
BY TOMAS VENCLOVA AND ELLEN HINSEY
(UNIVERSITY OF ROCHESTER PRESS, 2017)
REVIEWED BY ROMAS KINKA

The title Magnetic North is taken from a poem Tomas Venclova, a
towering figure in Lithuanian and world literature, wrote in 1975 shortly
before sending an open letter to the Central Committee of the Lithuanian
Communist Party protesting the system and asking for permission to
emigrate. In the poem he writes: ‘I attract misfortune / like the north
does a magnet, and, like a magnet a magnet, / misfortune pulls me in.’
(Lines translated by the reviewer.)

The son of the poet and journalist
Antanas Venclova, a faithful servant of
the occupying Soviet authorities and
for a period chairman of the Lithuanian
Writers’ Union, Tomas grew up in a
privileged position. Seeing the
injustices around him, however,
and troubled by his conscience, he
became a founding member of the Lithuanian Helsinki Committee. Now a dissident, suffering all the restrictions this status entailed and seeing no other option, he left his homeland at the age of thirty-eight, the most important decision and the most fateful step he had ever taken. At that point he had lived almost exactly half his life in the Soviet Union. Fortunately, he is still with us, and his misfortune could be said to be our good fortune – especially for those of us who read Lithuanian – as we now have the body of work he has produced over the four decades he has lived in the West, including the book under review here, which has already been translated into a number of languages, including Lithuanian.

*Magnetic North* is a wide-ranging discussion Venclova had with the writer, poet and translator Ellen Hinsey, encompassing descriptions of events in his life from his earliest days and his interactions with people such as Boris Pasternak and Joseph Brodsky, and later Czesław Miłosz, into which are woven history, politics and, above all, literature.

My thanks go to Ellen Hinsey, the *spiritus movens* of this book, since it was she, already an admirer of Venclova’s poetry (in translation), who, having found out about Venclova’s residency in Switzerland (not far from where Czesław Miłosz wrote his *Native Earth*), managed in 2003 to meet him. As she has said in an interview, Tomas revealed to her some episodes from his life and it became clear, even before she undertook to edit and co-translate a book of his poems (*The Junction: Selected Poems of Tomas Venclova*, Bloodaxe Books, 2008), that his reminiscences had to be written down, and that doing so was important both for Lithuania and world literature. I can only agree and what we have in *Magnetic North* is the result of an extraordinary life fully lived.

*Romas Kinka*

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**Tomas Venclova** is a Lithuanian poet, writer, scholar, and translator. He is Professor Emeritus of Slavic Languages and Literatures at Yale University.

**Ellen Hinsey** is the author of numerous works of poetry, essays, and literary translation. Her most recent book is *Mastering the Past: Contemporary Central and Eastern Europe and the Rise of Illiberalism*.
First published in 2004 *The Music Teacher* (‘Vardas tamsoje’ – ‘Name in the Dark’, if I’m correct) was made into a film in Lithuania, and is finally making its way into the English-speaking world in a fine translation by Marija Marcinkutė.

This is an unusual story, combining contemporary psychological elements and some of the characteristics of a detective fable. The nameless narrator and heroine, a provincial thirty-something police investigator, tries to solve the murder of a beautiful teenage girl found in the bathtub of a hotel room. The official coroner’s verdict hasn’t suggested anything suspicious, yet our investigator feels certain the victim has been killed and so continues to probe – mostly in the dark.

Her inquiries serve as a vehicle in which she travels back into her own past, and she is plagued by unwanted recollections of a forbidden love – a doomed affair with her school music teacher in Soviet-era Lithuania, which ended in her having an abortion. He did provide financial support for her legal studies but then disappeared, leaving only a gun as a farewell. Now though, he has suddenly returned, wealthy and politically well connected – possibly an ex-KGB agent – and demanding that she abandons her investigation.

This dreamy and nightmarishly strange narration shuns any traditional timeline as our protagonist recollects events from her childhood, her mother’s death, solitary days at students’ hostels, lonely summers at a friend’s empty farm, and choosing solitude to escape her drunken father and his equally unappealing girlfriend. Her imagination often runs riot, filling her monotonous days with visions, ghosts, witches and weirdos. This is, she says, partly because ‘it’s difficult to find a purely innocent person in a small town. It’s even more difficult to find one among law enforcement agents’; and partly because she tries to avoid real life in a place where nothing is personal or private, and where each day a secret admirer delivers a poisonous potted plant to her desk. She finds solace in alcohol, buying a bottle of Merlot on the way to the lake, then sitting on a cold bench and trying to forget her own mundane existence. She even has a glug
of brandy in her morning coffee in order to survive yet another day of stereotypes and superstitions.

But despair bubbles under the surface of the everyday life around her. Modern technology is yet to reach this small town, and Lithuania itself is still in the process of building a new identity, one that is marked by ancient prejudices and a history shaped by Soviet dominance. Yet super-efficient secretary Atali keeps the police station going, while its chief prefers concentrating on his Persian cat over following bureaucratic procedure.

Hurray for cats, then, for those who fight loneliness and for those who are happy to sit and observe what’s going on around them: ‘I tucked the cat under my jacket and left. The policeman on duty was dozing and didn’t notice how my breasts raged and growled unhappily.’ Renata Šerelytė’s rich and intricate metaphors, and astute observations are a great pleasure to read, but be prepared for a huge dose of dark and poetic surrealism.

Ewa Sherman

Ewa Sherman is a writer, translator and critic. She studied Polish Literature and Language, and Law, and worked with the Polish media. She’s translated several books of sonnets written by her mother Krystyna Konecka from Polish to English.

Renata Šerelytė is a Lithuanian novelist, poet, essayist and literary critic. She was born in 1970 in the small rural town of Šimonys in north-east Lithuania and now lives in Vilnius. She is the author of a number of novels and has won many awards in Lithuania for her writing, including the prestigious Jurga Ivanauskaite Award. The Music Teacher has been turned into a film.
In this brilliant debut the author carefully arranges texts like notes or snapshots, inspired by life in 1990s Lithuania. The period had seen the collapse of Soviet Union and a dramatic shift to Western values and consumerism. It was unpredictable, mad and at the same time magical. And this is what these short stories are like. In 90s kids listen to the music of Underworld, a magic ring turns the life of a man upside down, a philosophy professor becomes homeless and recovers, and a lady in a silver costume introduces us to her pet tiger. Incredibly inventive and utterly absorbing, this is a necessary voice in contemporary European fiction.

‘Restaurant Sankt Peterburgas’

You laugh because I’m only thirteen and I am already at the table in a jacket and trying to order some vodka. (Because there is nothing else to drink here, only vodka on the menu.) I saw everything, you came in thick black coats and knee-high snowy boots. I saw colourful sweaters under your coats, with tigers and panthers, and waterfalls and jungle birds. Then I saw you quickly taking those snowy boots off, sticking them into plastic bags and hiding them under the table, and slipping into those high heels that you brought on the sly. Where are your husbands? Why didn’t they come tonight? (Actually I know, I saw them standing at the taxi stop in leather jackets that you chose for them. They were arranging payments for the sauna. I know what they’re up to. I often meet them. When someone bought a remote-controlled lawn mower, they stood around it for a long time, everybody wanting to run it and unable to sort out whose turn it was.) Look at that boy sitting there, such a serious face, better come dance with us, you say loudly and pull my arms. I’m shy, because I don’t know how to dance, so I force myself to take another sip of...
vodka. But you know how to dance and sing. You know how to cook stews with bay leaves and make jams, and you know how to choose the right watermelon, and how to stuff shoes with newspapers to dry them. You cry as soon as it gets sad, and then you call each other and talk over the phone for a very long time. And not only can I not find words, I’m sitting here alone with this vodka and suffering. Come on, enough sitting, you tell me. I try not to look at your bodies, at those stupendous breasts underneath those tigers. But you are lifting your skirts and twisting your thighs on purpose, and then checking your hair with the palms of your hands. You clap and laugh when I climb onto the table to give a speech. I don’t know what is loosening my tongue, but I promise to hire a bus next week and collect you all, and drive around for the whole day. I would like to go shopping with you all, for fabrics and carpets, I say. You will keep on dancing and singing, unwrapping all the rolls of fabric and cutting off as much as you want to, and then we will fill the whole bus with those fabrics. Write down your phone numbers for me, I say, I’ll call you.

Jonas Žakaitis

Translated by Erika Lastovskytė

This translation was first published in The Happy Hypocrite – ‘Tolstoyevsky’, Issue 10, guest edited by Virginija Januškevičiūtė (London: Book Works, April 2018)

Jonas Žakaitis is a writer based in Vilnius, Lithuania. He has recently published his first collection of short stories 90s (90s.lt). His writings have also been published in various art magazines. He has also participated in numerous contemporary art projects as a gallerist and curator.

Erika Lastovskytė is a translator, publicist and rights professional based in Oxford. She is a creator, developer and manager of various cultural programmes and has worked on projects such as the Baltic Women Writers’ Tour in 2017. Erika is the winner of the prestigious Emerging Translator Mentorships Programme organised by Writers’ Centre Norwich.
Selija counts the days on her fingers. It’s too many now, and no sign of blood. What should never have happened has happened. She already has a son, Bentis, son of Gondas. He has seen more than ten winters. When the snow melts and the days and nights are of equal length, her son will be old enough to be a soldier, a commander like his father.

Bentis was born the first winter she came to live with Gondas. Bentis is her life. She has no other. And now she is expecting again. The blood is not coming, although she tries to summon it. Days pass as evenings give way to mornings. She has to hurry, because once the child starts to move, it will be too late to pull him out.

Selija knocks. The door is opened by an old woman, dragging her wolf-ravaged, scarred and painful yet long-since healed leg. They go inside. The house is small. How much does one person need? Especially an old witch with a leg ravaged by wolves.

Every corner of the house is stuffed with grasses. There’s an unpleasant smell from the salves for tending to wounds. It’s stuffy inside; the suffocating stench of dried plants and pork fat cooking on the stove mixing with kalanchoe leaves overwhelms Selija. She feels ill, the ground tilts and everything begins to spin. The plants come back to life, their dried blooms opening, their stems protruding and curling around Selija’s ankles.

When she opens her eyes, she is lying on the filthy floor, covered with a moth-eaten fur. The old witch is pressing something rancid to her face. Selija turns her head so that it doesn’t sting her eyes. She might be blinded. This old witch...
with the ravaged leg is capable of anything. She can turn water into ice in the summer simply by throwing some herbs into it. She can preserve the bodies of the dead until it’s time to bury them. She can heal men’s wounds, applying salves so repugnant that the men vomit from the stench, but the wounds do heal. She can fasten broken bones together...

Selija begins to cry; she doesn’t even know why. People say that everyone cries in the old witch’s den. Some cry for the dead, some for the living. Ultimately, wounds are wounds. There’s no sense in comparing them.

The old witch strokes Selija’s head, and everything is calm. The pain subsides, the fear disappears, evil disappears as well.

‘Why did you come?’ she asks. ‘Your child is fine, and so are you. You can go home in peace. You don’t need anything. You have everything you need.’

‘Yes, I have everything I need,’ Selija agrees.

‘But you came here as if you needed something,’ the old witch says.

She can see that the old witch knows everything. She knows that Selija doesn’t need this child. Selija is angry. Why doesn’t she just give her the concoction and send her home?

‘You’ll anger the mother of the gods. Don’t do it.’

Selija laughs. Her laugh is happy, melodic.

‘I won’t prepare the broth for you, not for all your silver, or for what your husband Gondas brings you.’

Selija laughs. She can’t imagine how silver wouldn’t soften someone’s heart or mind, or lessen their fear of God.

Rasa Aškinytė

Translated by Jūra Avižienis

A longer version of this extract was first published in the Vilnius Review.

Rasa Aškinytė is a prose writer, historian and a philosopher. The author of four novels and one children’s book, she achieved greatest success in 2014 when her novel The Man Who Needed Nothing became the Book of the Year in Lithuania.

Jūra Avižienis’s translations have appeared in the Vilnius Review, Best European Fiction and The Dedalus Book of Lithuanian Literature. She translated Rasa Aškinytė’s novels The Easiest and The Man Who Needed Nothing and is currently translating Jurga Vilė and Lina Itagaki’s graphic novel Siberian Haiku. She teaches writing at Boston University.
It’s the early 1990s in a free Lithuania. A man who did his compulsory military service as a paratrooper in the former East Germany is asked by a Western Sovietologist to recount his experience. After several failed attempts to record the absurd and often brutal events he saw, he decides to go to a small resort town to try again to describe the scenes in his head from those times. Love, men and women, disappointment, heroism and a lack thereof – this is an attempt at a reconstruction of himself and his generation.

Having arrived at a resort town in the west of the country, I first of all got ready to go to the sea and cut my nails.

I went to the sea, cut my nails, and lost the nail scissors. I bathed, ran around on the shore shouting nonsense, and rubbed myself down with my towel until my skin began to throb pleasantly. After that I sat down and with a moronic gaze stared at the sea. I don’t know what other people see while looking at it, but I don’t see anything. It’s good if a ship is sailing along the horizon somewhere. I see a ship then, but nothing more. When there’s no ship there’s just water, a lot of meaningless cold, salty water rocking back and forth.

Doctors say that it’s a generational problem. Some generations see God while looking at the sea, others hear symphonic music, Bach fugues, still others see a woman, Aphrodite, infinity, eternity, nirvana and other sorts of poetic trash. A generation that doesn’t see shit, pushed out into this world more or less in the 1970s, though time doesn’t have any particular meaning, I belong to that generation. A generation which doesn’t have any particular traits at all, a generation which is almost without any qualities. A generation which missed out on becoming hippies, for which the music of the Beatles was too sugary and which was too old to take up the ideas of the punks, while the Sex Pistols just reminded them of irritating noise. Actually, a substantial part of this generation became city folk, trusted the model of life offered by ABBA, but that’s
not a generational trait anymore, it’s just a statistic which neither AC/DC’s chainsaws nor John Lennon’s blood was able to destroy. What interests me is a generation which hardly has its ‘own’ music, its own idols, or any kind of understanding whatsoever about its homeland, history, love, money, family or responsibility.

A generation which paid a tribute of sorts to drugs, one that bled a little because of Afghanistan, but that’s more of an exception than the rule. The only philosophy of this generation was not having a philosophy or avoiding having one, and on a practical level this theoretical vacuum was filled by alcohol, but along with that this is a generation which didn’t learn how to drink, didn’t learn how to fuck, eat, save – in other words, didn’t learn how to enjoy pleasure. Even the rich figureheads of this generation who established successful families and flourishing businesses don’t see anything while looking at the sea except water. They simply don’t know how to be happy. This is the main, defining trait of this generation.

Generalisations are a horrible thing. But there are more horrible things than pleasant things in the world. Actually, I don’t give a shit who my generation is. It could be that it doesn’t even exist, and no fucking sea could be a catalyst for illuminating it. But I belong to that fucking generation, and no one can convince me that I am the only one like that, unique and beyond compare. I belong to the most Russified, most conned, most atheism-fed, and most naïve generation, and at the same time one that doesn’t believe in anything.

**Sigitas Parulskis**

*Translated by Jayde Will*

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**Sigitas Parulskis** is one of Lithuania’s most celebrated and translated contemporary writers. A prolific writer of poetry, fiction, essays and plays, Parulskis is best known for his raw, ironic and provocative style with which he explores the traumas of Lithuanians of his generation – those who grew up under Soviet rule and came of age during the country’s transition to independence.

**Jayde Will** is the translator of *Memoirs of a Life Cut Short* by Ričardas Gavelis and has co-edited the *Anthology of New Baltic Poetry* (Parthian, 2018). His translations of Latvian, Lithuanian and Estonian authors have been published in numerous journals, including *Poetry Review*, *Trafika* and *Mantis*. 
Undinė Radzevičiūtė’s award-winning novel has two parallel narratives: one is set in eighteenth-century China, following the travails of a Jesuit cleric who goes there to convert the Chinese, but instead ends his life serving three successive Ming emperors as a painter; the other is about three generations of women – a feisty grandmother, her daughter, a writer of erotic fiction, and two grown granddaughters, one a student of China and the other trying to be an entrepreneur – living together in an apartment building in the Chinatown area of an unnamed European city.

Once again, the Commission is spending a long time voicing its doubts over his horses.
Some members of the Commission close one eye and then the other. Some – stick out the tips of their tongues, as if to lick the horses. From afar. Some – push out their bottom lips, some squint with their narrow eyes, some puff out their cheeks. Like eunuchs on the stage of the Imperial Theatre. It seems to the members of the Commission that the heads of the horses are too small, their hocks too thin. The explanation that they are Iberian horses, and that is how they should look, does not help. The Commission, it seems, does not just doubt the existence of Iberian horses but of Iberia itself. It is convinced that the only horse in the world is the Mongolian horse. The wild Mongolian horse. Modest, tenacious and quite cunning. As cunning as a wild horse can be. With short legs and patches of brown and white. Like a cow. And a horse’s tail has to be white. Absolutely. And it absolutely has to reach the ground, says the Commission, and its forelocks absolutely have to cover the eyes. What use have they of horses that can see? Besides which, the Commission says that his horses are not real because they are placid, whereas horses are never placid. The repeated assertion that this is how Iberian horses look only increases the Commission’s mistrust.
They do not believe in the existence of Iberia or Iberian horses. And now they say it openly.
To the members of the Commission this is a brazen-faced out-and-out deception, one that may even offend the Emperor.
Of course, the Fifth Emperor would not himself come to see the horses.
The Commission says there is no reason for the Emperor to come since these horses have no bones.
He attempts to convince the experts that bones are not essential for horses but hears the doubt even in his own voice. It would be better if the Fifth Emperor were to come to see the horses for himself because Father Castiglione is beginning not to believe in his own horses, nor in Iberia, nor in his mission in this land.
The Commission expresses its doubts aloud, then in silence as to the horses’ bones, and then switch to the bones of the landscape.
As to the bones of the landscape, the Commission is in no doubt. They are not there.
The members of the Commission demand there should be ‘bones’ in the landscape and they should be seen as clearly as possible.
And they assert it would be best if the landscape around the horses were to be painted by a Chinese.
Perhaps by Leng Mei or some other Chinese.
There was no shortage of them.
At moments like these Father Castiglione suddenly begins not to understand Chinese and he is not quite clear as to what will happen next.

Undiné Radzevičiūtė

Translated by Romas Kinka

Undiné Radzevičiūtė is an acclaimed writer and the author of five novels and a collection of short stories. Three of her books were shortlisted for the Lithuanian Book of the Year. In 2015 Fishes and Dragons was awarded the European Union Prize for Literature.
In this passage we meet the elegant, elderly Parisian petite dame Odile, as well as the novel’s narrator, a melancholy, culturally displaced young man who lives in her attic and has become her friend and companion on daily walks around the Quartier Latin. But as these two unlikely friends share an aperitif, we also meet Papievis’s uniquely un-Lithuanian prose – its focus on memory, relationship to place, the subllest details of human exchange and, perhaps most importantly, the relish of the possibilities of language that is firmly in the French tradition of Barthesian jouissance.

I notice Paula from a distance. She sees me and stops at the door. Paula is Portuguese; she is the building’s concierge. We get along well. I always leave her the spare keys when I go away. You never know what might happen. But that she would pause like that... The wheels in my ears are rattling even louder, the shards are melding together.

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Six-thirty, the phone rings.

‘If you’re at home and not too busy, would you like to drop by for an aperitif?’
‘With pleasure, madame, I’ll be right over.’

I climb down six flights of winding stairs and take the lift up three.

I lean against the balcony railing and smoke a cigarette, occasionally turning my whisky on ice so that the ice cubes tinkle like bells. It’s an especially clear September evening. Summer has ended but autumn has not yet begun – a time when the sunlight no longer blinds but still carves sharp contours, the time of year when foliage is resting but not yet inviting your eyes to colour it red or yellow. Exhaling I tell myself: We personalise everything, so why not this glass of whisky, a farewell-to-summer aperitif?

‘Do you remember how we met?’ asks Odile. I take a sip.

A light wind barely, just barely, rustles the curtain.
'Sebastien? But I’m quite sure you introduced me to him... Madame Fournier?’ I draw back the curtain. ‘Never mind me, but you should be able to remember...’ I step over the threshold. ‘You don’t have any flowers. Some of the neighbours have even planted shrubs on their balconies. Don’t you like flowers?’ ‘Have you forgotten how old I am?’ I haven’t forgotten. Odile sits with her bony shoulders pressed against the high back of the leather armchair. She’s always a little cold, so before going back out to smoke I wrap her in a shawl. ‘Age and flowers?’ ‘Flowers need to be cared for.’ ‘Paula could do it.’ ‘If you don’t care for plants yourself it’s as if they aren’t your own, don’t you think?’ I look at the ceiling, and it seems to me that the round plaster moulding at its centre is turning, like the wheel of time that one would like to stop. Or roulette. Do you think you could win? ‘Pour me a little more,’ she says, finishing the last drop and holding out the empty glass. ‘With an ice cube. Before Selma gets here.’ How to get out of yourself – as one does by leaving home, driving out of the city, or flying to another country? How to understand yourself if you can’t see yourself from the side? ‘Why don’t you pour yourself some?’ Daylight streams in through the curtains, drawn from the evening like honey from a hive. It slowly goes out. I refill my glass.
As an emerging literary translator, I have recently found myself facing some key questions: Which Lithuanian book would I first like to translate into English? And why would I choose to translate that particular book?

The answers arose when I considered that Lithuania – the country from which I hail – is only just beginning to explore the teaching of creative writing. Supporting and being attentive to the needs of writers who, like me, are also emerging, therefore seemed vital. So I looked beyond the headlines, to where I could put my fingers on the new literary pulse; and there I found an abundance of talent.

The writing I discovered is heart-warming, intoxicating and incredibly inventive. Known widely as the ‘liminal’ generation, these authors experienced Soviet childhoods, which they lived out in monotonous suburbs, dreaming of summer pioneer camps and queuing for hours for bananas and chewing gum. Their adolescence saw the dramatic collapse of the country they were born in and the dissolution of the values they were taught to hold dear; the influx of wild capitalism that followed meant they then lived through a kind of a gold rush.

Put together, these experiences have generated a strange, unpredictable, yet somehow magical energy that shaped many a fearless adventurer. But it produced a new breed of writer too – one who holds memories and experiences of two worlds.

While at home government campaigns were being designed to address anxieties around their nation’s recent history and its apparently shattered sense of identity, this generation set off to see the world. Finding themselves in London, Brussels, New York or Venice, these creative young minds began to develop new visions and to carve out spaces in which they could reflect on their transitional experiences. You can read this in their work: writers embracing both their Soviet childhoods and the post-Soviet madness – producing stories about their grandparents, for example, or about their search for the cultural heroes they were once deprived of.

The astonishing novel Alphavilnius by Valentinas Klīmašauskas provides a good example of this new writing in its picture of a fragmented postmodern psyche caught up in the clash of
ideologies and sociopolitical power struggles. Jonas Žakaitis, in his short-story collection 90s, takes a different tack, offering glimpses of lives suspended between dreams and reality, while Gerda Jord’s Gertrude: Graphic Diary of Generation Y shares an intimate account of the author’s teenage years. But while these works seem to aim for some kind of reconciliation with history, others are taking giant strides into the global literary discussion, tackling such issues as anxiety about impending armed conflict (Orpheus: Journey Ahead and Back by Tomas Vaiseta); language, fact and fiction in a post-truth society (Polygon by Valentionas Klimašauskas); or climate change and the current parenting crisis (Air by Marijus Gailius).

These are just a few of the names in the vibrant contemporary Lithuanian literary landscape. I have certainly lost my heart to the short stories of Jonas Žakaitis – you can read an extract in this magazine, and I hope to make them all available to the English-speaking audience in the near future. But there are many more brilliant Lithuanian authors of the liminal generation whose work is yet to be translated. I hope they too will find English-language publishers, so you can fall for them just as I have.

Erika Lastovskytė
I Can’t Remember My Future Name

Dwarves with powdered faces, Acrobat’s costumes, lacking shoes, throwing knives – they let me pass, recognising me, even if they can tell

I don’t remember them – nor the others, the trickster, extending his hand full of gimmicks, jokes and swords; even the horsewoman, targeting me

with her bow from eight paces, she releases – not an arrow – but a dove. I don’t remember her, and you – probably now just a passing thought.

I don’t remember anyone – what will be, but I go on, and dancers and cats smile when I steal between the knives and tiptoe over hot coals – they see me

as if I am wading through cotton candy, clouds, or a flood of chrysanthemums. I heard tonight they will be auditioning for a new jester. I will try out for that.
Leave a Tip for the Rain

You wipe wet skin – the path of your fingers runs west, along collarbones. Your hand writes hieroglyphs, and there is no shore, no direction, when the rain entangles

the streets with clouds. Chestnuts wince along sodden cobblestones, I’m soaked, and can no longer be anything but rain, so from the balcony

I run along gutters and into the street – the murmur of the city will follow me, flood me, drown me, and time will rain its minutes down, knocking hard on sleep.

The currents of serenity, if only they could, would wash the jetty where you felt unease.

Two swifts chatter away in the sky – please, just leave a tip for the rain.

Ilzė Butkutė

Translated by Rimas Uzgiris

Ilzė Butkutė’s first book of poetry, Caravan Lullabies won the Zigmas Gaidamavičius-Gėlė Prize in 2011 for most significant debut. She next published a practical guide for workers oppressed by their employers, Fire Your Boss. In 2014, Carnival Moon, her second book of poetry was published. Her poems have been translated into many languages including English.

Rimas Uzgiris is a poet, translator, editor and critic. His work has appeared in numerous journals. He is translation editor and primary translator of How the Earth Carries Us: New Lithuanian Poets. His translations of Judita Vačiūnaitė are forthcoming from Pica Pica Press. He teaches literature, translation and creative writing at Vilnius University.
RIVETING WRITING FROM THE BALTICS

LIVONIAN: A RESURGENT LANGUAGE AND ITS LITERATURE
BY CHRISTOPHER MOSELEY

This year’s London Book Fair features the literatures from three nation-states – Estonian, Latvia and Lithuania – but their national languages are not the only ones in the Baltic lands to have literatures of their own. Nestling in the north-western tip of Latvia are villages that were once inhabited by another Baltic nation, one that never had a state of its own: Livonia. The Livonians could rightly be called the ‘aboriginal’ population of Latvia, and they have a very ancient heritage, first mentioned in the thirteenth century in the Chronicle of Henry of Livonia, which was penned by one of the German invaders of the region.

The Livonian language is Finnic, and its closest relative is Estonian. Nowadays the Livonians are a tiny remnant: in the last Latvian census there were 250 people who declared themselves to be of Livonian heritage, and of these, only about twenty can speak the language. This number however, is now increasing.

Livonian literature has existed, in a modest way, at least since the mid-nineteenth century. The first book to appear in Livonian was the Gospel of St Matthew, which was published in London in 1863. Where Livonian literature has been particularly rich, however, is in the field of poetry. This may have something to do with the way past generations of speakers were taught their own language – through songs and poems. In fact, creative writing in Livonian can be said to have begun with the poet Jāņ Prints, whose poems mostly dealt, naturally enough, with seafaring life. This was the start of a tradition that continued, despite a lack of official encouragement from the Latvian state, up to 1939, and the Soviet occupation. Even today there are three poets actively working in the language: Baiba Damberga, Ķempi Kārl – who writes in the long-extinct northern dialect of the language – and the indefatigable language activist Valts Ernštreits.

Nowadays the descendants of the Livonians from the Baltic coast of western Latvia are dispersed, so the opportunities to use the language within a community have gone, but pride in Livonian ancestry remains, and literature has become all the more important as a means of keeping the language alive. There have been bilingual Livonian-Latvian literature collections, and these have won awards.
and brought Livonian culture to the wider Latvian public. This year, however, for the first time, Livonian literature is made accessible in English, thanks to a bilingual Livonian-English anthology *Trillium*.

The death of the Livonian language has been predicted over and over again. Twenty-five years ago, when I wrote a thesis about the decline of the language, I too was probably guilty of prematurely predicting its death, even though in those days there were still people alive who were born into families speaking the language. That generation is gone now, but, happily, they have left behind a generation of heritage learners who are now flourishing.

*Trillium* will, of course, have a native audience, but what is more, it will bring this fascinating little corner of the Baltics onto the world stage.

*Christopher Moseley*

Christopher Moseley is the Teaching Fellow in Estonian at the School of Slavonic and East European Studies, University College London, and wrote his Masters’ thesis on the Livonian language for the same institution.
The impressive cover illustration of *The Baltics Riveter* was created by the young Lithuanian artist, Laima Matuzonytė. Laima won this, her first professional commission, as part of a competition run by Pop Up Projects, which also sponsored the cover artwork.

Here, Bhavit Mehta, Pop Up Projects’ Project Manager, describes the UK/Baltic countries’ artistic collaboration.

To coincide with the London Book Fair 2018 Baltic countries Market Focus, artwork produced by young artists from Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and the UK will be showcased in an exhibition at the Royal Over-Seas League (ROSL) in Mayfair, London, from 9 April to 20 May 2018. Co-curated by Pop Up Projects and House of Illustration, the exhibition will feature some of the best work from collaborations between 150 talented young artists from sixteen universities and colleges and eighteen professional illustrators from the four countries, including Kate Greenaway, William Grill and Beegu author, Alexis Deacon.

The young artists – all under twenty-six and 80% of whom have English as a second language and/or are BAME – have worked under the guidance of their artist-mentors to produce illustrated stories in a distinct *leporello* (concertina) format. The stories have been published by four partners (Päike Ja Pīlv in Estonia, kuš! In Latvia, Vilnius Academy of Arts Press in Lithuania and Nobrow Press in UK). The resulting library will be presented alongside the exhibition.

Developed in collaboration with
the cultural platform, Inkygoodness, Pop Up Projects will also be launching a new digital platform, Pathways, designed to seek out, curate and showcase direct to children’s publishers diverse, emerging illustrators and comic artists, who have been drawn from this project and beyond.

The project has been funded by Arts Council England (Ambition for Excellence award), Lithuanian Council for Culture, Latvia’s International Writers and Translators House and the Ministry of Culture of Estonia, and is supported by a number of other partners in each country.

The Riveter magazine commissioned one of the young artists from the project, Laima Matuzonytė, from Vilnius in Lithuania, to create this issue’s cover, based on the theme of costume, craft and design.

Bhavit Mehta

Bhavit Mehta has worked as a publisher, translator and festival director. He is a trustee for Wasafiri magazine of international contemporary writing. Bhavit has collaborated with UK and international writers and literature partners in his work with the British Council, Commonwealth Foundation and, currently, with Pop Up Projects.
A BRIEF BUT RIVETING HISTORY OF ESTONIAN LITERATURE
BY MIHKEL MUTT, GUEST EDITOR

Estonian literature is like any other European literature but with some special traits that are a result of our recent and ancient past.

In the beginning there was oral folklore. Then Estonia became a German colony and, thanks to Luther’s reforms, the locals finally became literate, although most of them read only the Holy Bible (first translated into Estonian in 1739).

As nationalism spread throughout Europe in the mid-nineteenth century, our own belles lettres emerged and a provincial doctor, Fr R. Kreutzwald, composed our long, national epic poem ‘Kalevipoeg’. It has immense symbolic value, though few have read it from beginning to end. Then, in the space of only two or three decades, Estonian literature sped through all the ‘isms’ that in the West had developed over centuries – a kind of cultural Meiji restoration. At first realism was the predominant style, but there were occasional sparks of romanticism and irony. The topics this literature covered were mostly rural and historical, and in many ways Estonian literature was akin to that of the Scandinavians and Germans, whose writing influenced us greatly.

In terms of genres, most Estonian novels were written by men, but in
poetry women had the upper hand – a dominance that continues to this day. Drama, written by either sex, has never flourished.

Between the two World Wars our most important classic writer, Anton Hansen Tammsaare, wrote his novels, giving Estonians, from peasants to townspeople, the definitive image of their recent past. Then, at the end of WWII, several of our major writers went into exile and continued their work there, while at home, behind the Iron Curtain, a long lull descended. The first signs of thaw emerged in the late 1950s, after which a kind of renaissance took place – popularly referred to as ‘the golden sixties’ – during which a number of writers came forward, their work now considered ‘new classics’. These waves of elevation gave way in the 1970s to resignation and irony, which became the trademark of Estonian prose.

But when Gorbachev instituted his reforms and Estonians began to polish up their national colours, irony felt out of place – both in real life and in literature. The resulting change in the political system coincided with a generational change. Some older writers were decrepit, some couldn’t adapt, and only a few middle-aged writers carried on working in an environment in which the abolition of censorship meant there was no longer any need to write between the lines. The arrival of the internet also began to have its impact, and a new and more direct literary style emerged, one that was simultaneously leaner and more prolix.

Global literature, with all its vices and virtues is on the march here, as elsewhere, and though historical novels are written in Estonia, the emphasis now is on the present: gender issues, interethnic problems, identity. There is, however, a small but strong undercurrent of ‘Finno-Ugric revivalism’ – back to the woods and rural authenticity, etc etc), and there are writers who still use motifs from folklore as a way to speak to their readers.

The current Estonian literary scene is lively. The number of titles published and copies bought per capita are both abnormally high; there are a plethora of monthly, and weekly publications and events, and there are more literary wannabes and debutantes than ever before. All this speaks to the fact that, while writing today is a profession like any other, for many Estonians, literature is even now a quasi-religion, and the writer is, as they have always been, a kind of spiritual leader.

Mihkel Mutt

Mihkel Mutt is one of the most popular living Estonian writers and the long-time editor-in-chief of publications such as the weekly newspaper Sirp and the literary magazine Looming. In the late 2000s and early 2010s, Mutt was busy publishing his memoirs, but in 2013 he made a successful return to literary fiction with his novel The Cavemen Chronicle, which he has followed with The Estonian Circumciser, Occidental Estonia and The Inner Immigrant have recently been published in English.
**Riveting Estonian Recommendations**

From guest editor, MIHKEL MUTT

**Truth and Justice pentalogy**  
by Anton Hansen Tammsaare

This series represents more than simple storytelling. À la Thomas Mann and Dostoevsky, it explores questions about the cursed human condition. In the first volume the hero battles against the land and his crooked neighbour. Must one become corrupt oneself to obtain justice? In the second part his son goes to town to study. He loses his faith in God but realises that goodness is more important than truth. In the third part this son joins the 1905 revolution; this volume could be a guidebook for anyone who thinks that we can improve the world through violence. The fourth part matches Strindberg in its description of married life and the eternal struggle between the sexes. The fifth book is a majestic summing up – a coda similar to that of Goethe’s Faust – with its own ‘Verweile doch...’ moment.

**Treading Air**  
by Jaan Kross

Set in the 1920s, this novel follows a boy born to poor parents who fights his way up the social ladder, finally landing a place in the prime minister’s office. But fate lets him down: the Soviet and German occupations deny him the chance of a great career. He joins the nationalists to work towards the restoration of the Estonian Republic, passing up the opportunity to escape to the West offered by a representative of the Vatican. He lives the remainder of his life – some forty years – doing menial work: making suitcases in a factory. A metaphor for the whole generation.

**The lyrics of Juhan Viiding**

Viiding was a cult poet and a bard for whom life became too much to bear – he left it at the age of just forty-seven. A professional actor, he often sang his poems in cabaret style. His sparkling wit, allusive language and irony cannot – I believe – be translated, but I recommend him nonetheless.
RIVETING REVIEW

THE INNER IMMIGRANT by MIHKEL MUTT
TRANSLATED BY ADAM CULLEN (DALKEY ARCHIVE PRESS, 2017)

REVIEWED BY JOHN MUNCH

On the surface, Fabian, chief protagonist in this compilation of short stories by the prominent Estonian author Mikhel Mutt is about as warm and engaging as an icy blast of Baltic winter air. Fabian affects to be critical of rural artlessness and traditions. As a young man he rejoices in the liberating air of the city. ‘You can do anything in a city, even exact revenge unpunished’, he muses. He professes he doesn’t miss his childhood and that he hasn’t inherited any childhood complexes.

Spiritual types make Fabian queasy with jealousy. He would like to give a Tibetan man a whipping or tempt a saint or ‘chase a vegetarian down the street with a cane’. He believes the only sensible thing that has come from the east is polygamy. As his celebrity grows so does his hatred of speaking to audiences in libraries, literary clubs and military units. While writers in Soviet-era Estonia are required to take an active stance (in favour of the party line of course), Fabian just wants to exist without offering views.

Fabian’s journey from youthful striver to would-be lion of the Estonian literary establishment is traced in seven stories that form the bulk of this collection and are its beating heart. All the Fabian-linked tales appeared originally between 1979 and 1981, at the tail end of the Soviet era in Estonia.

Bundled as a sequential package under one set of covers should give the reader a better handle on this portrait of the artist as a young (and not-so-young) contender for literary celebrity. But there are no simple verities in a communist environment – apart from the suffocating grip of its bureaucracy. Take the opening story, ‘My Fair Slum’: a young Fabian declares his distaste for rural existence and the simple-mindedness of its inhabitants. As a lifelong city dweller, he feels rootless and gripped with anguish in the country: ‘The country was not human. It was an alien not-I.’ According to Fabian, country living takes away much of what makes a person interesting, robbing him of ‘his masks, complexes and poses’. Since most people are depressingly simple anyway, he asks with breathtaking condescension, ‘Why simplify them even more?’

Where, it has to be asked, does the party diktat begin and where does irony or feigned belief take over? There are
clues to be found in the Soviet-era puzzle palace. The story’s ironic title is one; maybe not all is so perfect in the city. Another is Fabian’s own admission that his ‘super-urbanist’ attitude is to some extent a façade. He commits to memory locations celebrating significant happenings in the city, such as a ‘treacherous’ shooting of a communist revolutionary by a bourgeois secret-police officer. But is this a genuine commitment to socialist ‘reality’ or Fabian’s psychological capitulation to the requirements of the regime?

Either way, the stories demand sustained concentration and sometimes we might yearn for an ideological sherpa to help us navigate the swirl of undercurrents below the surface. Indeed Fabian has been described as Mutt’s alter ego; what is unclear is how much is alter and how much ego.

One final, and personal, quibble: the translation is peppered with American vernacular usage. Talk of ‘head honchos’, ‘dudes’, a ‘prom king’ and characters who ‘snicker’ gave me an oddly jarring sense that I had been transported away on occasion from Estonia to some mythical Tallinn, Texas.

*John Munch*

*John Munch started his career as a reporter and editor on the Cambridge News. He then worked for the Sheffield Morning Telegraph, the Guardian and the London Evening Standard. In the 1970s, he reported for the Toronto Star, before spending twenty-five years on the Financial Times.*
In those moments of leisure, away from work and friends, blissfully lounging in the half-empty carriages of long-distance trains, wandering around dilapidated neighbourhoods, in the hours saved by not attending class reunions – during those times, Fabian would read other writers' books, watch films, and go to see plays, interspersed with attending artist-acquaintances’ exhibition openings. At the same time, he would also ponder the nature of life; would compare the art with what he had experienced personally. The thoughts led him to a dead end. They worried him. For quite some time, Fabian had been bothered by the fact that everything in life had changed. He didn’t blame art for the discord, since art was more beautiful, and it’s hard to blame what is more beautiful. Life itself had to take responsibility – there was something wrong with it.

One subject that always captivated and stimulated Fabian at such times of musing was that of paramours. Books, both historical and contemporary, were seething with them, as were other art forms, giving the impression that paramours had always been held in high esteem. All it took was a glance into the past. The list of ‘women of love’ might be thousands of times longer than the endless old series of romance novels that bore the same name. And not only have rulers, artists, and admirals added the sinful jewel of forbidden love to their lives, but every cooper or guild master had his own matted-haired maid,
seamstress, or cook. Fabian had heard rumours that men kept paramours even now. But where? In America? For oddly enough, when he scrutinised his friends’ and acquaintances’ relationships, he couldn’t find a single paramour. True, you could find men who hadn’t registered their partnership and practised an open marriage. But that wasn’t the same! ‘Open marriage’ was just a nice title. In some ways, it was extremely similar to an ordinary marriage. And so, the participants themselves forgot their official status. A couple of Fabian’s acquaintances in a similar situation had only noticed it when they travelled somewhere and were denied a shared hotel room. Fabian was also aware that from time to time, men would simply chase skirts at parties and bars, but this was pure horniness, nothing spiritual or exceptional. One time, Fabian himself had even observed a young woman standing in a doorway. It had happened in Tallinn’s Old Town, on Niguliste Street. Fabian was just returning from buying pesticide at the chemicals store across the way. Afterward, he couldn’t even explain to himself why his mind had started taking that a path when he spotted the woman. Maybe she was sheltering from the rain? Had it been raining at all? He couldn’t remember. And even so, whenever he thought back to her, he always strayed into daydreaming for several minutes.

Fabian had methodically familiarised himself with the different kinds of relationships practised between the genders in Estonia, from late-night visits to group sex; however, none corresponded to the classic understanding of a relationship with a paramour that Fabian had envisioned. He could be roused from a deep sleep and asked about paramours, and would know what to say right off the bat, the same way a trained spy remembers the details listed in his false passport.

Everything about a paramour starts with secrecy. One might say that a paramour is, in essence, secrecy plus collusion. One can’t just show up anywhere with a paramour. You didn’t attend your office Christmas party or a cabaret with her. You would, however, certainly take a paramour to a quiet corner of a café on the ground floor of a tenement house or to a private sauna party in the company of intimate friends. You would miss out on walking together in a Song Festival parade, but the two of you could watch the same parade on television together that night. Fabian imagined how you might feel at the parade knowing that your paramour was marching somewhere nearby, her feet slapping the concrete. He imagined the frisson of tension it would give you; how it would add a spark to the holiday! You didn’t promenade with your paramour on a city square, but rather wandered the side streets in a garden suburb. And not at rush hour, but at dusk, when all women look grey. This especially on September nights, when the tepid sunset transitions to twilight in half tones – slowly, like the way the lights dim and go out in a classy cinema at show time. A paramour belongs to fall in general: she is like a migratory bird who has been left behind by the flock of women that has flown off to warm family-lands. And if someone scoops her up in the fall, then no doubt he’ll keep her around for the winter. What will come in spring, no one knows.
Paramours lack ties: they have no relatives, no past or future. They have no obligations, and nor will they have children. A paramour belongs to the world of cars with shades drawn in the back windows, veils, telephone booths, flower shops, secret slips of paper, passwords, and conspiratorial apartments. To Fabian, it seemed that out of all spheres of society, this type of setting could only be found in two places: black-market retail and espionage. Mostly in the latter. Fabian had had no personal encounters with espionage. But he respected it. He knew a thing or two about it. Primarily through art: at home, he would often press his ear up against the radio on nights when thrilling serial dramas were broadcast. Fabian reckoned that whereas only pretty women’s names could be given to tropical typhoons a few years ago, now one could start classifying paramours themselves according to distinguishing features and work methods, using the more familiar espionage services as a basis. You’d get a whole array of types by doing so: the Sureté, the SAVAK, the Mossad, the Gestapo, the Okhranka, and other types of paramours.

But there were no more paramours. They were a dying breed, the way dinosaurs once became extinct. A cold climate was the cause. Was the warmth of heart now in short supply? Apparently, that hadn’t been the case just recently. Fabian knew of one mid-level office at a ministry he visited frequently that was occupied by four fifty-year-old women who still bore the traces of their former beauty. They’d been the sunshine girls of once-eminent men, worthy of promotion to that office. And how many such offices might exist! There they sit, that iron reserve of ours!

Mihkel Mutt

Translated by Adam Cullen

Adam Cullen is a poet and translator of Estonian literature and poetry into English. He has translated works by a wide range of Estonian authors including Tõnu Õnnepalu, Mihkel Mutt, Kai Aareleid and Rein Raud, and has twice been nominated for the Cultural Endowment of Estonia’s annual award for translated literature. Originally from Minnesota, Cullen has lived in Estonia for ten years.
With Pobeda 1946: A Car Called Victory – a novel named for the emblematic Soviet saloon car produced from 1946 by the Molotov Works – Estonian author Ilmar Taska demonstrates that he is not just a successful film director and producer, but also a nuanced narrator, skilled at evoking the spirit and suffering of a bygone era. And in Christopher Moseley’s sensitive translation and with his in-text explanations and key endnotes, readers otherwise unfamiliar with Estonian language, culture and recent history are able to gain an understanding of the context and setting of this work.

Against the backdrop of an occupied post-WWII Estonia, in the process of being assimilated by the Stalinist regime, Taska develops a multiple-viewpoint narrative showcasing a range of experiences and personal histories. The author names his three main protagonists simply as ‘the man’, ‘the woman’ and ‘the boy’, suggesting, perhaps, that these perspectives represent the more generalised experiences of the oppressor and the oppressed, and, further, that this triangular dynamic symbolises the Soviet Union (‘the man’), invaded Estonia (‘the woman’), and the subsequent repercussions on the development of the nation (‘the boy’).

Writing through the child’s eyes, Taska adeptly repositions the sources of fear and suspicion pervading the adult world, for instance by reflecting ‘the boy’s’ positive interactions with ‘the man’ – the Soviet official who drives the eponymous, gleaming Pobeda. In a similar way, the ethnic tensions created by the post-war displacement of peoples across Europe are redrawn using the filter of the boy’s experience: he sees being sent off to a school in...
Moscow as a personal adventure. Echoing Taska’s own childhood experiences, we see how ‘the boy’ quickly learns to adapt, often remaining oblivious to how decisions others take will dictate his future.

In contrast to the ravages of war and occupation, there is also a love story here – between Alan, the BBC radio broadcaster living in recovering late 1940s London, and Johanna, an Estonian opera singer experiencing the deprivation of her post-war homeland. This romance provides an engaging and optimistic narrative strand about how love and hope can endure despite separation and difference. The lengths Johanna goes to hear Alan’s broadcasts from London hint at how some Estonians longed for British salvation from Soviet rule; but this thread also explores a key theme of the novel – the role of the media in post-war Europe, and how it was used both to control the flow of information to the general populace, and to send veiled personal messages.

Developed from a prize-winning short story, in its longer form this complex and nuanced book explores a number of other tensions: the ever-present – and apparently for some, necessary – threat of conflict between nations; how the state’s attitude and actions are not necessarily reflected in the values of individuals; loss of trust – both in institutions and fellow citizens; and the moral dilemma posed by following one’s own convictions, or capitulating simply to survive. All of which make for a beautifully composed but painful examination of the power state politics exert over the individual.

Jacky Collins

Jacky Collins has worked in the Division of Languages at Northumbria University since 1993. She is currently focusing her research on Icelandic Crime Fiction, Film & TV. In 2014, in conjunction with the Lit & Phil Society, she set up Newcastle Noir, Newcastle’s annual crime fiction event.

Ilmar Taska studied at the Moscow Film Institute and worked internationally as a film producer, director and screenwriter before establishing his own television company, which was the first private national network in Estonia. In 2011, Ilmar made his literary debut and in 2014 he won the annual literature prize in Estonia for his short story ‘Pobeda’. In 2016 his novel Pobeda 1946 was published in Estonia to critical acclaim.
The boy had to be silent again. Daddy said, with a frown as always: ‘Don’t talk so loudly.’

‘He can talk,’ interjected his mother, ‘but you have to be quiet and don’t boom in your deep bass.’

But what’s the use of talking alone, thought the boy, if Daddy isn’t allowed to answer and Mummy doesn’t want to?

The room was dark and gloomy. The boy climbed onto the windowsill and looked out between the curtains. The street was getting dim and damp as well. Yet muted lights shone from the windows of the house next door and the boy saw shadows moving. They were running, playing, maybe even laughing there.

His mother said in a quiet, scolding tone: ‘Close the curtains.’

The boy was sad that his father was sullen, while his mother was always angry about something. Mummy was always busy, making meals, washing dishes, ironing clothes, mopping the floors, darning socks. Always in silence. She didn’t like the boy laughing, shouting, or asking her anything. She liked it even less when Daddy did it. He wasn’t allowed to talk at all. Nor to go to the door or the window. He always had to hide from everyone, but he never wanted to play hide-and-seek with the boy. He sat or lay in the back room, reading old, bad-smelling books. Once the boy had found an old photograph album with pictures of Mummy and Daddy in which they were laughing and beautiful.

‘Now you look quite different. Horrible,’ the boy had said, at which his mother took the album from his hands and put it on a high shelf, so that the boy could no longer get at it.

‘I’m bored,’ he told his father. Daddy was smoking, and didn’t raise his eyes from some old magazine with yellowed pages.

‘You want to look at pictures of tanks and armoured cars?’ asked his father. Those pictures the boy had seen countless times, however, and knew the make of every armoured car by heart.
‘May I go outside and play?’
‘Off you go,’ said Daddy, without looking up.
‘But not far from the house,’ warned his mother, nervously brandishing the iron.

The boy was already grabbing his cap and sprinting out into the brisk air. He climbed onto a woodpile on the other side of the street and sat down on a thick log that extended from the stack, as it rocked under his weight. Finally he was back in the driver’s seat. He switched on the engine, put it into gear and felt the bus starting to move under him. He rocked himself on the wooden seat as he drove along the potholed road, and the noise of his bus got louder when he changed gear. As he drove and battled with the bumps in the road, he noticed two lights approaching from the end of the street. A splendid shiny car was slowly approaching. It was brand new, and beige in colour.

‘Psssh’ – the boy was pressing the button to open the bus doors. ‘Last stop! All passengers please get off.’

The approaching Pobeda had stopped on the other side of the road. The boy climbed down from the woodpile and stepped closer to the Pobeda, curiously, his heart pounding. He had seen beautiful cars before, but none so brilliant and new. Sitting in it was a tallish man in a grey coat, who had noticed the boy and was looking at him, smiling broadly. He didn’t get out of the car or turn off the engine. The boy approached the car with a self-conscious gaze. He made a circuit around the car, bent down behind it and sniffed the exhaust-pipe gases. Even that smelled wonderful. The man wound down the car window and leaned his head out toward the boy: ‘Do you want to be a car mechanic?’

‘No, a bus driver,’ replied the boy.

‘So cars don’t interest you much?’

The boy moved alongside the car closer to the man, rose on tiptoe and looked in the window. Coloured lights shone on the dashboard and the seats were covered in leather.

‘Do you want to get in?’ the man asked the boy with a friendly glance. The boy knew that he mustn’t talk to strangers, but sitting in a car like this was worth breaking the rules for. He could simply sit in it quietly. The man opened the door, stretched out his warm hand and pulled the boy up onto the seat. He looked slyly at the boy and flashed the dashboard lights to please him. The man laughed. His hair was nicely styled and he was clean-shaven, not like Daddy. It was hard to sit silently when such an amusing man was wanting to chat. And they did chat for a bit, about cars.

Then the man inquired: ‘What’s your name? Where do you live?’ The boy didn’t answer those questions. Mummy had forbidden him to answer such questions. He didn’t understand why, but Mummy and Daddy didn’t let him talk to strangers. He stretched out his arms and tried the steering wheel. It was cold, smooth and curved. How nice it would be to hold onto, not like the stick with which he drove his bus. The man seemed to read his thoughts, shifted aside and said: ‘Come, sit closer and hold onto the wheel like proper bus drivers do.’
The boy placed both hands on the wheel and looked straight ahead through the windscreen. The man pressed some button and the wipers suddenly sprang into action. The boy squealed in surprise and they both laughed. The man took the boy’s hand, pressed the button again and the wipers stopped.

‘Now you try. Does your father have a car too, or does he go by bus?’ asked the man.

‘My Daddy doesn’t go out at all,’ the boy blurted out. He looked at the man, startled. But the man only smiled. He stared deep into the boy’s eyes and replied, almost consolingly, ‘Not all guys are car enthusiasts like we are.’ This man can be trusted, the boy thought.

‘My Daddy is only interested in tanks and armoured cars.’ But now his mother’s perpetual warning rang in his ears again: ‘Never talk about Daddy to anyone.’
The year is 1578, the place Tallin, Livonia. The all-German town council has gathered to discuss beer tariffs, drains – and whether to authorise sales of the Chronicle of the Province of Livonia, the work of an independent-minded Estonian pastor called Balthasar Russow. Herr Topff, the comically verbose scribe who has scrutinised the Chronicle, wavers indecisively under his superiors’ cross-examination. Does the Chronicle show suitable respect towards the cream of Livonian society, the German nobility and bourgeoisie?

Solemnly, Herr Topff identifies three shortcomings: the chronicler has not applied the words ‘Anti-Christ’, ‘cannibal’ or ‘sodomite’ to Livonia’s archenemy; he shows excessive sympathy for his downtrodden fellow countrymen, the Estonian peasants; and – the horror! – he has failed to dedicate his magnum opus to Tallinn town council. Despite this slight, the councilmen – none of them great readers – are averse to appraising the book themselves. And so they nod this critical history of Livonia through.

The resemblance between the bumbling deliberations of Tallinn’s sixteenth-century councillors, satirised in A Book of Falsehoods, and those of Soviet censors, was fully intentional. In the 1970s, when Jaan Kross wrote his epic work, Estonia had been part of the Soviet Union for more than quarter of a century; and Glasnost was not even a twinkle in the eye of Mikhail Gorbachev, who was still a functionary in the Caucasus. Kross had suffered both Nazi and Soviet oppression, and spent six years in a Siberian gulag. Even after returning to his beloved Tallinn, he found himself unable to publish his poetry freely. The historical novel suggested itself as an alternative creative channel and a way of evading the censors. This strategy proved successful; part of the German translation of the novel, published in East Germany in 1986, was itself translated from Russian, and the parallels between the travails of sixteenth-century Livonia and oppression in the Eastern Bloc seem to
have escaped both Soviet and East German censors.

Perhaps this was in part because *Between Three Plagues* tells the story of a real historical figure, Balthasar Russow; indeed, nearly all its characters are attested, some in detail, others as historical footnotes. Kross abided meticulously by the sparse-known facts, which afforded him 'the right amount of concrete information and the right amount of space for the imagination to spread its wings'. The *Chronicle* itself gave him plenty of clues about his protagonist. Crucially, it was a historian's contention that Russow's origins were Estonian (not German) that prompted Kross to write about him.

*Between Three Plagues* – a monumental work, brought to the Anglosphere in Merike Lepasaar Beecher’s admirable translation – is both the story of Balthasar Russow’s life, from his schoolboy years to his death in 1600, and a vast historical fresco. The title refers to three outbreaks of the Black Death in Tallinn, and, metaphorically, to the foreign powers that fought over the troubled province of Livonia – Russia, Poland-Lithuania and Sweden – during the twenty-five devastating years of the Livonian Wars. The reader is tempted to ask: ‘Why only three plagues?’ There seem to be more: Denmark, too, is vying for control of Livonia; and for the suffering Estonian peasantry, the German manor lords are hardly less of a plague than marauding Tatars or Polish mercenaries.

Balthasar Russow gradually makes his way up through the society of this turbulent world from his humble beginnings as a rural wagoner’s son. The first volume, *The Ropewalker*, opens with the astounding feats of two Italian tightrope-walkers high above Tallinn, which inspire young ‘Bal’ and will remain with him to the end of his days. As one of the few Estonians in Tallinn’s Latin school, he too has to manage a delicate balancing act, combining his home life in a fishing village with an elite education among the sons of Tallinn’s German burghers. And visiting his uncle’s family in the village of Kurgla, he is confronted with the unremittingly harsh lot of the peasants. Epp, his first love, comes to symbolise a lifelong bond with the people who work the land. Later in the novel, the young man is drawn into political intrigues in Tallinn and Finland through the Machiavellian Doctor Friesner, and is bewitched by his beautiful, tragic wife, Katharina. The contrast between the two worlds could hardly be greater.

As a student in German Stettin, Balthasar continues to move up in the world, pursuing his studies in theology and classical languages. Yet he remains the odd man out – the only Estonian from a peasant background among his German and Slavic fellow scholars. And on a chance visit to Livonia, he is forced to take sides in the peasant uprising of the late 1560s, fighting alongside the elected peasant ‘king’ and his men in their ill-fated attempt to seize the land held by their overlords.

On returning from further studies in Wittenberg and Bremen, Balthasar becomes the pastor of an Estonian congregation in Tallinn and determines to write a chronicle of events in Livonia, ‘this wretched land where nothing was remembered’. In *A People without a Past*, he seeks to record the truth, and to give the people of Livonia a historical memory and thereby an identity. It is an endeavour that again
brings him into conflict with the powerful, not least other Germanised Estonians who, unlike Balthasar, deny their links with the common people. Even Balthasar’s wife, Elsbeth, sees him as something of a country bumpkin, learned though he may be.

What makes Between Three Plagues such an extraordinary reading experience is Kross’s remarkable ability to conjure up a scene through sensory detail, be it the slow-burning mutual attraction of young Balthasar and Epp while they clear the land for planting, the harrowing execution of an elderly peasant in Tallinn, or Balthasar’s wintry sleigh ride across the frozen Gulf of Finland. Kross’s imagery is vivid, his language – superbly conveyed in Beecher’s translation – colourful and poetic. But most importantly, Kross strikes a poignant balance, portraying an often brutal late-medieval society and a man who is both very much of his time, yet also modern in his struggles with his conscience and religious faith. In this, Kross also shows himself to be a consummate ‘ropewalker’.

Fiona Graham

Fiona Graham is the translator of 1947: When Now Begins, by Elisabeth Åsbrink. Her translation of Torill Kornfeldt’s The Re-Origin of Species is due to be published by Scribe in July 2018.

Jaan Kross is Estonia’s most celebrated writer. A lawyer by training and poet by vocation, he was imprisoned first by the Nazis in 1944, then by the Soviets in 1946. A year in prison in Tallinn was followed by six in the gulag of Vorkuta, and a further two years in Russian exile. Kross lived the rest of his life in Tallinn. When Estonian independence finally came, he helped write the constitution of the new republic. He died in 2007.

THE DEATH OF THE PERFECT SENTENCE BY REIN RAUD
TRANSLATED BY MATTHEW HYDE (VAGABOND VOICES, 2017)
REVIEWED BY WEST CAMEL

Titles are important. For me, a good artwork title is more than a label, it is integral to the text – chosen and worked on by the author and sensitively treated by the translator.

‘The death of the perfect sentence’ and its natural variant – ‘the perfect death sentence’ – therefore intrigued me. And my curiosity only increased as I worked my way deeper into this intricately plotted spy novel set in an Estonia that is still part of a tottering Soviet Union, with the forces of independence, perestroika and old-guard conservatism vying for supremacy. What perfect sentence was Rein Raud (and his translator Matthew Hyde) referring to? Did he mean the end of the project whose intended goal was a communist utopia? Or was it the opposite – the ideal of a free and independent Estonia, seemingly just out of reach to Indrek, Raim, Anton and their gang of idealistic activists?
Death seemed to suggest an ending—obviously; but also a crossing-over from one world to another. Throughout this short novel the characters are forever crossing borders: from Estonia to Finland and Sweden and back again; from Russia to Estonia, and also from Russian to Estonian—the ethnicities and their languages still sharply defined, despite half a century of Soviet rule.

There is also the journey over the border between the present moment— the independent, twenty-first-century, capitalist Estonia of the time Raud is telling his story—and the Estonian Soviet Republic of the past, when the events of his tale take place.

Then there are the borders between individuals—the distances that must be traversed if love is to flourish. And this, is turns out, is the locus of the book’s title; the moment that makes sense of what, until you reach it, feels a rather nebulous, overcomplicated and fragmentary plot.

Alex and Maarja—initially two secondary characters—are drawn individually, and not particularly willingly, into the chain of amateur and professional agents and double-agents who are smuggling files out of Estonia. Without knowing about their clandestine connection, they meet. And they fall in love.

A romance ensues and at the moment of consummation, Alex whispers into Maarja’s ear ‘the perfect sentence’—what is ‘I love you’ in Estonia, I wonder?—and the whole convoluted web the book has been until this point rearranges itself into a neat, sharply focused line of cause and effect.

The epiphany is delicious, and is followed almost instantly by the horribly moving realisation of the inevitable outcome—the destination the novel’s disparate elements have been pointing to all along.

It takes a brave and experienced writer to trust his own skills and test those of his reader as much as Raud does in this sneaky genius of a novel. It is inspired to then give it a title that on opening the book is so enigmatic, and on closing it is so crystal clear.

Rein Raud has written eight novels in addition to several collections of short stories, poetry, and numerous essays. He has won many awards and has been compared to Umberto Eco, as he combines prolific literary activities with a successful academic career as a cultural theorist and philosopher. Three of his novels have been translated into English, and his works have been published in many other languages.
Kai Aareleid’s *Burning Cities*, one of three titles in the Baltic Season of the Peter Owen World Series, successfully weaves a powerful domestic tale within the larger tapestry of seven decades of Estonian history. Authors of intimate stories that reflect the course of a country’s historical fortunes face a challenge: to create fictional protagonists we’ll care about without their writerly imagination being clipped by the magnitude and details of nationally significant events. Aareleid deftly overcomes that challenge, giving us believable human beings through the eyes of Tiina Unger, who recounts the story of her family, from her parents’ first meeting in 1941 to the present day, with most of her tale unfolding during the years when their country was part of the Soviet Union (1944–1991).

The vicissitudes of Tiina’s family and neighbours follow those of Estonia, and through them all we catch glimpses of other lives stretching further back into the past. In a land ruled for centuries by a succession of foreigners – Germans, Swedes, Danes, Russians – and briefly independent from 1919 to 1944, Estonian identity has, remarkably, survived, but Aareleid does not shrink from depicting the intricacies of its context: the Ungers’ dispossessed neighbours, as well as their doctor, are Baltic Germans, who formed most of the country’s elite in pre-Russian days; and the influence of Russian culture long before WWII also surfaces.

The child Tiina intuits from silences and broken sentences the losses suffered by the adults around her and the anxieties behind their cryptic words. The dark corners of her father’s personality will turn out to be the result of grief and the cause of further tragedy. Old Mrs Wunderlich’s sighs as she tenderly dusts her books – ‘My thousand friends ... Oh, how I’ve loved you all’ – betray her disconnection from a new era she hasn’t chosen to inhabit. The sadness that overwhelms Hedi, Tiina’s nanny, when they pass the ruins of the Vanemuine Theatre and a long-forgotten melody comes to mind, is palpable to the child, though she’s too young to understand that this had once been the country’s foremost national theatre and their city of Tartu the site of the annual festival of Estonian song.
‘Sometimes memories come back and knock the wind out of you. Ahh. Let’s go home,’ Hedi says.

But even as Tiina moves into the future, she faces losses of her own: the end of the love between her parents; the move to an unknown destination of her best friend and first love, the Russian boy Vova, whose father is stationed at the military air base outside Tartu; the traumatic death of her father.

Time has a slippery, even liquid, quality in Aareleid’s hands: chronological order gives way to the workings of memory, present-day events, reflections and associations. No less daring, or boldly executed, are the shifts in point of view of the early chapters.

The book consists of more than eighty short scenes, each with a tightness reminiscent of poetic meter. Together they give the prose a compelling tempo, crucial to which is the precise, lyrical and unsentimental language of Adam Cullen’s excellent translation.

Valeria Vescina

Valeria Vescina is an author, teacher and critic. Her debut novel, That Summer in Puglia, is launched this spring. Her activity as a critic includes literary and opera reviews for the European Literature Network, Seen and Heard International and Talking Humanities. She is currently researching her second novel.

Kai Aareleid is an Estonian writer, whose début novel, Russian Blood, was published in 2011 to wide acclaim. After her second novel, Burning Cities, was published in 2016 she was awarded the title Estonian Writer of the Year. She is also a prolific translator into Estonian and has translated works by Bruce Chatwin, Javier Marías, Paulo Coelho and Roberto Bolaño.

TOOMAS NIPERNAADI by AUGUST GAILIT
translated by EVA and JASON FINCH (DEDALUS, 2018)
reviewed by MIKA PROVATA-CARLONE

This is a story written for a world where ‘the Lord has many days – and I’ve got even more than that’. It straddles the borders between child and adult imaginations, fuses literary genres and defies expectation. The world of Toomas Nipernaadi is a realm of sharp realism and enchantment, of Norse pantheism and religious syncretism, where myth and Christianity coexist in both tension and harmony, and where stories act as a substitute for a more meaningful life, as an escape, and as a way to personal salvation.

Toomas Nipernaadi is a tale of truth built around an element of fiction. It is a finely textured, well-crafted folktale that resonates with the poignancy of a parable about history, about a nation, and about the moment of modernity in its act of secession from the past. But, with repetitive motifs, an archetypal protagonist,
formulaic attributes and ornaments, and a faux-naif spectrum of truths, lies and illusions, it is also a bard’s ballad.

Nipernaadi is the eternal youth growing old; he is the ur-optimist confronted with disillusionment and the dark corners of the world he inhabits. He is Nils Holgersson, Leopold Bloom, Archibald Olson Barnabooth, a less introspective Lemuel Gulliver, a more prosaic, yet beguilingly poetic Young Werther, and a Sinbad the Sailor of Western modernity. He is a wanderer flitting from place to place, fleeing disasters, attachments, permanence or the fulfilment of desire – he is a sublime master of the désir du non désir. His wanderlust yearns for a state of Edenic purity and enunciates our discomfort with the tonality, rhythm and dynamics of an accelerating existence – thus describing the clash between interiority and external reality.

Toomas Nipernaadi’s life gesture is purposeful aimlessness rather than aimless purposefulness (a somewhat accentuated Kantian distinction); and his story, which is embedded in time just as it transcends and dematerialises it, is an exercise in the art of narrative fugue – as restless, as lyrical and ode-like, as intricate and mysterious, yet perfectly natural in its animistic, universal anthropomorphism.

Nipernaadi would like to be the distillation of a wild, errant humanity, the perfect Rose of Sharon represented here as the flower of the field. Yet he is as terrifying as he is irresistibly charming. He has no scruples or inhibitions, but possesses a melting heart of gold. He walks into people’s lives (a girl’s, a whole village’s, the reader’s) and leaves nothing in its place, the result of a goblin-like instinct for mischief and interference, as well as a misguided yearning to change the world, correct ills and bring about ecumenical prosperity and joy. But a sense of decline, of a harsher, baser realism, takes over the fairy-tale, fantasy elements as the novel progresses, and as our puckish, protean protagonist grows older and seems to reach an existential impasse – a dead-end to his escapism. Yet one should reserve judgement and be a cautious moralist and critic. This little volume has a thrill in store for the persevering, as well as the power to reveal a new, exciting literary and imaginative world.

Mika Provata-Carlone

Mika Provata-Carlone is an independent scholar, translator, editor and illustrator, and a contributing editor to Bookanista. She has a doctorate from Princeton University and lives and works in London.

August Gailit was a late neo-romanticist, whose entire output focuses on the external opposition of beauty and ugliness. His most influential work is Toomas Nipernaadi (1928), whose protagonist has become a classic figure in Estonia. A film adaptation entitled Nipernaadi and directed by Kaljo Kiisk was released in 1983. He emigrated to Sweden in 1944.
Paavo Matsin’s Gogol’s Disco is set in the near future, in the provincial Estonian town of Viljandi. Russia – in the form of a resurrected Tsarist empire – has vanquished NATO and retaken the Baltic States, ending their brief period of independence. Tallinn and Tartu have been destroyed, and most of the Estonian population has been deported. The opening chapters of the novel introduce us to the main characters, a motley, comical assortment of petty rogues, mostly Russians who have recently settled in Viljandi, some of them based on real-life characters.

Konstantin Opiatovich the pickpocket had certain unfailing daily habits which he had acquired over many years spent in penal institutions. Every morning he would iron his trousers with a metal mug heated hot for the purpose and clean his shoes with a small, threadbare satin cloth which he always carried on his person, then he would fill his pockets with plenty of the bread crusts which he dried out on his windowsill. Having done that, he would normally take an early tram all the way to the final stop. Then he would step carefully from the asphalt road onto the narrow flagstone path, trying to avoid the puddles, and set course contentedly for the old Jewish cemetery. Jewish people were known for their resoluteness and respect for tradition, and they abided by many ancient laws, so the shaded cemetery was just the right place for this honourable pickpocket to begin his day. His former cellmate, an Odessa Jew, had told him a thing or two of interest about the secret customs of this oppressed national minority. He couldn’t remember all of it now, but this fairy-tale world, with its miniature gate intended only for the rabbi, and the little piles of stones heaped up on the gravestones in place of flowers, somehow had a restorative effect on Opiatovich as he prepared for the day’s work ahead.
Later, after a whole day spent on the tram, it would have been too risky to travel back to the final station just for the sake of having a walk. During the day, when he was tired of the rowdy company and of groping in people’s handbags, Opiatovich would normally relax by strolling between the tram stops and feeding the pigeons with the bread crusts. But here, in this kingdom of silent stones and Hebrew texts, where there was not a single other person, he could prepare himself for the hustle and bustle to come. Guided by his inner feelings he would stop by one of the gravestones and place a pebble which he had picked up earlier onto the dewy stone surface. In that way Opiatovich practised a specific skill which was vital for pickpockets, namely digital dexterity. As he did this he would listen to the silence, and to his inner voice. But when he picked the stones up from the ground he was sure to never break the ancient thieves’ rule, which he knew all too well by now: even the most sentimental thief should never lift anything heavier than a purse.

Paavo Matsin

Translated by Matthew Hyde

Having started his literary career with self-published experimental avant-garde poetry books, Paavo Matsin has moved on to tense and naturalistic prose writing. Matsin won the Criticism Prize of the cultural weekly Sirp in 2011, The Serpent Pen Prize in 2012, and was nominated for the Estonian State Cultural Award in 2012 and the Prose Book of the Year in 2014.

Matthew Hyde is a literary translator from Estonian and Russian to English, originally from Norwich, UK, now based in Tallinn, Estonia. Prior to being a translator, he worked for the British government for fifteen years as political secretary at the British Embassy in Moscow and deputy head at the British Embassy in Tallinn.
I’m alone! Damn it, that’s a fact. I finally grasped that this morning when I woke up in a king-size waterbed. I’m alone. There’s no one. Only me. I opened my eyes, and the only things my ears could pick up were the soft drone of escalators, my own breathing, and that gentle lapping of waves rocking me so luxuriously in the rubber bed. Like a sailor lost at sea. That’s it. Okay, the steady hum of refrigerators sounded faintly from downstairs, too, but that was truly it. The music that had incessantly set the atmosphere here for the last few days had ceased.

I pushed myself up and off the waterbed (which isn’t all that easy, by the way), and tripped on a whisky bottle and bags of chips. I barely kept my balance. My head felt so heavy that it was tugging me right towards the ground. Then I accidentally stepped on a skateboard, and fell. The loud thud that rang out sounded strange, somehow. My head? I felt it. A helmet, thank God. I’d slept in it the whole night, the price tag painfully scratching my ear. What do you know – it paid off.

I went to the men’s bathroom and had already pulled it out when I stopped and thought for a moment. I put it back in my pants and entered the women’s restroom. It was cleaner there. I urinated in the first stall, then rinsed my face and stared at myself in the mirror. I sniffed the shirt that I’d taken from the Calvin Klein store a day earlier. Not good. I tore it off and tossed it in the trash bin. I splashed water over my armpits, patted down my hair, and left. I took the escalator down. I opened a new Burberry deodorant in the Ideal Cosmetics

One minute you’re embedded in chirping and buzzing modern-day consumer society, oblivious and running on autopilot just like everyone else, and the next, you find yourself mysteriously and utterly alone in a ghost city. Lui does just what perhaps many of us would, taking shelter to wait for answers or any other sign in modern man’s Eden: the shopping centre. As he slowly comes to grips with the new reality and rides the roller-coaster emotions of complete freedom, of truly owning everything, Lui begins to comprehend what it means to be, most likely, the last human and marketing director on Earth.
store and applied it where necessary. I fetched a fresh t-shirt from Esprit. I went into Skechers and sat down in front of the shelves. I took off my sneakers and smelt one. Nasty. I’ll get new ones here every day now. Every god-damned day. Fact.

And now, breakfast. I walked past McDonald’s. No, can’t take any more of that. How many days in a row had it been already? I should tally them up. I walked into the Rimi for groceries. I downed an entire bottle of Danon strawberry yoghurt, ate half of a banana, tossing the rest of it over my shoulder, picked up a shiny red apple, took the biggest bite in the world, marvelled at how sweet it tasted, and, imitating a baseball player, chucked the fruit somewhere towards the check-out lanes with all my might. Something collapsed with a crash. I cocked my ears. Nothing. I took a running start and kicked a display of oatmeal packages as hard as I could. The result was something akin to a snowstorm. And then silence once again.

Armin Kõomägi

Translated by Adam Cullen

Armin Kõomägi was born in Moldova in 1969 of an Armenian mother and an Estonian father, and thinks of Estonia as a very extraordinary and valuable borderland. ‘Logisticians Anonymous’, a story from his 2005 collection Amateur, was awarded the Friedebert Tuglas Short Story Award and made into a film.
In the beginning there were just two feelings: pity and hatred for Kaata’s wholesome misery and the surrounding corruption, which made you consider it a human dwelling or home only with effort – later, when my mind had become very miserable, I called myself to account, asking whether it was cosier to lie with your head poking into the trampled slush than to still be able to perceive your own situation; and hatred because Kaata had got herself into such a situation in the first place. The sense of awareness of playing a game was shamefully strong in me, just as was the complete inability to tell anyone else about it.

In order to regard the path to her present situation as describable at all, you had to know Kaata thoroughly. If a person is eighty years old, looks like a bundle of different-coloured rags, is starving to the marrow, in a cold house, it is senseless, even cruel, to talk of her descent into wretchedness as if it were a play.

At any moment Kaata might lose her reason. But that knowledge, that her appearance and condition had the effect of an accusation, still existed in her.

I don’t take my clothes off in the evening anymore, the house is cold, there’s no hot water, I throw myself down with all my clothes on, I wrap myself up in newspapers, and so I go on, I’ve always told the young ones: don’t throw out the newspapers once you’ve read them. In the daytime I read them, some of them I read every line from start to finish, I was once given a radio for my birthday, but
the Boy took it up to the second floor, I can’t get up there any more. And I don’t want a radio anyway, Kaata excuses herself, people’s voices sound strange, the talking sounds as if it comes from some other world, brisk and clear and somehow a bit too solemn. I don’t care for the radio.

When I wrap myself in newspapers in the evening and pull the blanket over me, I try to lie quite straight, so that if death steals a march on sleep and the Boy finds me, I won’t have to be laid out straight. I will have frozen straight.

Kaata was standing with her back to the window, I couldn’t see her expression – I myself had good sight, I tried not to react, I tried now to be as neutral and numb as possible. When I told this to Sonny, Kaata continued, I saw that her eyes were glistening slightly, he’s a sensitive boy, but you can’t see his heart.

I didn’t know anything more, when I saw with my eyes, I’d kept myself away from this house for twenty years, five years ago I visited a few times, carrying out a survey, carrying it out, really carrying it out, because then Kaata was very forceful, so forceful that sometimes she forgot the pretence of being hard of hearing – but then, as she saw me off at the bus stop, she would ask: Is this a dream? I wasn’t dreaming that you’ve visited me?

Ene Mihkelson

*Translated by Christopher Moseley*

Ene Mihkelson was born in central Estonia, the daughter of a farmer. She made her debut in 1967 as a poet, her complicated style rooted in layers of family myths and history. Her novel *The Dream of Ahasuerus* was regarded as the greatest Estonian novel of the end of the twentieth century, and her next, *Plague Grave*, has already been described as one of greatest Estonian novels of the twenty-first.
In 1940, when Estonia was occupied by the Soviet Union, the attempted obliteration of its literature began. By 1949, thirty million books and magazines had been destroyed. All the achievements and the memory bank of the early years of Estonia’s independence seemed to have been eradicated.

Spirit proved greater than power, however. Following Stalin’s death in 1953, it was through literature and culture that the Estonian people gradually began to heal. Having returned from the Gulag, Jaan Kross (1920–2007), a lawyer who had begun his literary experiments before the war, began to forge his great European novel. In it he pieced together the story of Estonia’s place in Europe, going back to the Middle Ages in order to highlight the values that keep collective historical memory vivid and Estonians’ perception of themselves as Europeans strong. This work, *Between Three Plagues* (reviewed in this magazine), finally made it into the hands of English-language readers in 2017.

Today’s Estonian literature, though, inevitably returns to that period when our shadowy history could not be fully expressed. Mihkel Mutt – a guest editor of *The Riveter* magazine – in his novels examines the Estonian man on his path from the Soviet regime to post-Soviet society, describing this existential journey in personal terms that are full of irony and scepticism.

Ilmar Taska’s thrilling novel *Pobeda 1946 – A Car Called Victory* (also reviewed in *The Riveter*), discusses the archetypes dictatorship created – collaborators, conformists, resistance fighters, victims – something not previously addressed in Estonian literature. Taska and his novel have become popular with Estonia’s Finnish neighbours, perhaps because, like Sofi Oksanen, a Finnish writer with Estonian roots, Taska deals with the psychology of a KGB operative, through whose actions peoples’ lives are lost, others lose trust, and nobody knows who is who.

A completely new approach has been taken by writers Eeva Park, Maarja Kangro, Kristiina Ehin, who have highlighted issues around women’s bodies, identity and self-realisation. Park’s poetry collection *The Rules of...*
Bird Hunting, soon to be published in English, studies memory and values, while Kaldmaa – who heads Estonian PEN – weaves together love and human rights in her poetry collection One is None (already published in English). Ehin reconstructs memory and beauty in her works, while advocating environmental issues and gender equality in her public-speaking engagements.

There is also a younger generation of writers within Estonia’s Russian-language community. Led by poets Igor Kotjuh, Pi Filimonoff and Andrei Ivanov, this group have used Estonia’s ‘re-independence’ as an opportunity to re-establish themselves and their literature.

Thus modern Estonia writes its story – one that is still a work in progress, and simultaneously reconstructs the past while creating new values for both today and tomorrow, all the while asking what it means to be human.

Imbi Paju is an internationally acclaimed filmmaker and writer. She has achieved global recognition with her documentary Memories Denied, which was also published as a book of essays and translated into numerous languages.
You are no better than anyone. You are no worse than anyone. You have been given the world. Look what there is to see.

Nurture what is around you, nurture who is beside you. All creatures in their own way are funny.

All are fragile.

I sing in praise of the loser for the winner is well lauded, I kneel before the forlorn, I bow before the beaten. The world-quitter creates, discovers selfdom in dreams; the reality-bearer holds strength and stature untold.

I sing in praise of the loser and for the have-not’s joy; I crown the outcast, pressing my lips to that noble brow – to the one who labours lifelong with lack and loss, both lightly and upright, I am true to the core.
All you need will come your way in one or another veiled form. If you recognise it, it will be yours.

All you want will come your way, it will know you inside and out. Breathe, count to ten.

The cost comes later.

A house by the sea forever feels like a ship just put ashore.

Every night it roams across endless oceans, ages and spaces.

All around is a drift of stars, deep within weeps a hearth that no one will light.

As a dog misses its master, so the house by the sea pines for its captain.

Doris Kareva

Translated by Miriam McIlfatrick-Ksenofontov

Doris Kareva is one of Estonia’s leading poets. She published her first poems at the age of fourteen. She has worked for the cultural weekly Sirp and as the secretary-general of the Estonian National Commission for UNESCO, and is currently an editor for the literary journal Looming. Her collection In Place of the World received the National Cultural Prize in 1993. In 2001 she was awarded the Estonian Order of the White Star.

Miriam McIlfatrick-Ksenofontov is a lecturer and freelance literary translator from Northern Ireland who has lived in Estonia since 1991. She translates Estonian poetry primarily for performance at festivals and collaborates with musicians, poets and artists. Her translations also regularly appear in journals and anthologies. Her own poetry has appeared in Estonian translation by Doris Kareva.
In *Reading Rilke*, his reflections on translating the poet, William H. Gass equates reading and translating and coins the term ‘transreading’ to suggest their inextricable relationship. Many, myself included, would agree that translation is the most acute form of reading. Which is why, in 2014, I used Gass’s concept as the title of the course I run at the Poetry School in London: ‘Transreading Central Europe’.

‘Transreading’ courses focus on reading poems brought to English by translation, English-language poems inhabiting other cultures, and multi-lingual poems where English is the door-opener to other tongues. In these courses, with the curiosity and inventiveness of language travellers entering the unknown, we *trans*read in order to *trans*write: we compose new poems that transcend our readings. Through such acts of transcreation, we also transform our habits of writing and existing in this multiliterate world.

With Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia this year’s London Book Fair Market Focus, the Poetry School has decided to respond to the event with a ‘Transreading the Baltics’ course, in which we will transwrite poetry sampled from the three bilingual anthologies Arc Publications is publishing around the event: *Six Latvian Poets*, *Six Lithuanian Poets* and *Six Estonian Poets*. We will also write in response to the poems you will find in this, *The Baltics Riveter*. Our texts will thus become ‘poetic reviews’ and will be featured on the European Literature Network website (eurolitnetwork.com).

Since no knowledge of Latvian, Lithuanian or Estonian will be required to turn our readings into new poems, the following question may well arise: can we bring the kind of acuteness we achieve when reading a poem written in our own language to a poem whose original language we don’t know? I believe we can – by creatively rereading the translation (which can be seen both as a copy or a more polished version of the original); this should lead to rewriting, which, in turn, allows us to inhabit the original poem.

Poets have always created new poems out of old through imaginative rewordings. This is how new versions of Homer, Catullus, Sappho, Dante, Rilke, Neruda and Ritsos have entered the English language. Some poets deliberately avoid fidelity to the original (surely ‘faithfulness’ in translation is a paradox); some purposefully collate versions by other translators.
who may or may not have known the original language of the poem in question. (Here, for me, the word ‘version’ is interchangeable with ‘translation,’ although I’m well aware that in the UK poets such as Don Patterson have argued for a different status for each concept.)

I side with Octavio Paz’s pronouncement that ‘each original poem is the translation of the unknown or absent text’: and I choose to ignore the largely misquoted Robert Frost assertion that poetry is what’s lost in translation. I see translation as creative rewriting. Which is why, in my transreading courses we opt for Derek Mahon’s approach, as explained in his preface to Echo’s Grove: ‘the best plan may be to approximate with zest, to refuse pedantry and intimidation.’

For me, Clive Scott, the translator of Rimbaud and Baudelaire, says it all: any translation is ‘an autobiography of the reading self’. I believe that in transfiguring unknown texts by unfamiliar poets we create new autobiographies of our reading selves. And this makes me wonder, therefore, what Baltic traits the poets who will transread the Baltics will soon display.

Elżbieta Wójcik-Leese

Elżbieta Wójcik-Leese writes between English, Polish and Danish; her multilingual texts have appeared in a variety journals and anthologies. She teaches poetry-in-translation courses for the Poetry School in London and works at the Centre for Internationalisation and Parallel Language Use at the University of Copenhagen. She was shortlisted for The Poetry Society’s Popescu European Poetry Translation Prize in 2015.

TRANSFORMING THE BALTICS
BY ALLAN CAMERON

Why the Baltic countries? It’s a question I’ve been asked many times since Vagabond Voices started publishing novels from the region. The truth is, I underwent no Damascene conversion to this literature, rather the reasons for my interest in publishing it are a mix of personal interests, business considerations and an evolving relationship.

When I first visited the London Book Fair in 2010, I gravitated to the Estonian stand. Small languages are something of an obsession of mine, as I spent much of my childhood abroad, surrounded not only by other languages but also by interesting language conflicts. In addition, the independence of certain small cultures from the Soviet Union was a subject close to my heart. I would be deceitful, however, if I didn’t mention that, as a publisher, my interest was also partly influenced by the 100% translation grants offered by all three Baltic countries.

I was most persuaded to commit to
this region, though, by my 2014 visits to Tallinn, Vilnius and Riga, where I found that all three Baltic countries are very much defined by languages, their political borders following their linguistic ones more closely than elsewhere in Europe. Language is therefore the prime indicator of Baltic national identity, and literature is held unusually dear. In fact, one of the great joys of working with these countries is their attachment both to their own literatures and to literature in general.

Another attraction to Baltic literature is that, in my experience, because small languages aren’t widely studied and their literatures are therefore less accessible, one can often find hidden masterpieces. Such an example is Antanas Škėma’s *White Shroud*, which is considered Lithuania’s modernist masterpiece, and which Vagabond have just published this year. We’re about to publish another such gem: *I Loved a German* by A.H. Tammsaare, who is considered Estonia’s greatest writer and something of a national hero. I never expected when I started in this business that I would publish a man whose statue sits in eternal, erudite thoughtfulness in the centre of a park bearing his name.

*The White Shroud* and *I Loved a German* are also topical: the first, a story of a refugee from WWII inhabiting the limbo of displaced persons’ camps, describes the alienation and mental anguish of all refugees. It reminds us Europeans that we were once – like the Syrians of today – forced to leave home in search of other havens, however unwelcoming. The second book, which also concerns tolerance, examines in a more light-hearted key and beautifully discursive prose the doomed relationship between an Estonian of peasant background and the daughter of an expropriated Baltic-German landowner. Vagabond don’t just search for classics, though: my current favourites include contemporary novels, such as Ričardas Gavelis’s *Memoirs of a Life Cut Short* and Pauls Bankvoskis’s *18*.

There’s a logic to concentrating on one particular region. It takes time to find out who the local writers, translators, publishers and funders are and how they work; and particular languages and translations have specific editorial issues, so it is necessary – and time-consuming – to build up knowledge of a country’s and a language’s political and cultural history. A small publisher such as Vagabond should therefore not spread its translation nets too wide: we do publish works from other countries, but we are now heavily invested in Baltic literature and will remain so for some time.

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Allan Cameron is the editorial director of Vagabond Voices. He has written two novels, two collections of short stories, a nonfiction work, two collections of poetry and translated twenty-four books.
During the 1970s and 1980s, however, Latvia began to see astonishing print runs of books in which readers searched for – and found – the themes around freedom that were hidden in the subtext of these works. During these same years, Latvian literature written in the West by the many excellent writers who had fled Latvia during WWII was slowly trickling back into the homeland, along with books such as 1984 and Ulysses – both of which were translated into Latvian by Dzintars Sodums.

Latvia’s independence in 1990 gave a new generation of writers a completely different set of possibilities for literary experimentation and they began writing for the sake of literature itself instead of trying to conceal political messages. At the same time, exposure to the study of other languages and to Western universities and European writers’ houses opened up new avenues for writers to learn from the experiences of others. By translating T.S. Eliot and Dickinson into
Latvian, for example, Kārlis Vērdiņš grew into one of the greats of modern Latvian poetry. The prose of Inga Ābele, however, grew out of the long Latvian storytelling tradition.

The significant historical shocks Latvia experienced during the twentieth century have provided fertile ground for the development of Latvian literature in the twenty-first. The singular novel series ‘We. Latvia. The 20th century’, which was the brainchild of writer Gundega Repše, holds a prominent place in this movement. This series features the work of fourteen modern prose authors examining Latvia’s recent difficult and complex history in engaging and contemporary styles, and these have become bestsellers. Pauls Bankovskis’ 18 (reviewed in this magazine) transports the reader to Latvia during its interwar independence. Osvalds Zebris’s In the Shadow of Rooster Hill describes the events of 1905 across Europe. Māris Bērziņš’ The Taste of Lead lays bare the deep wound left by the Nazi destruction of Latvia’s Jewish community (you can read an extract from the book in this magazine). Gundega Repšes’s Bogene shows a family’s experience of Soviet atrocities. Inga Ābele’s The Rumble discusses the fate of both humans and horses during the 1949 Soviet deportations. Arno Jundze’s Red Mercury shows Latvia’s experience of ruthless 1990s capitalism.

And Nora Ikstena’s Soviet Milk (also reviewed in these pages) tells the story of a mother and daughter living under Soviet occupation.

In 2018, therefore, as Latvia celebrates the centennial of its independence and is featured along with Lithuania and Estonia as a special guest nation at London Book Fair, Latvian literature is in its prime. Steeped in both local and broader literary traditions, written in rich, poetic Latvian, and having navigated the meandering path of its recent history, without doubt Latvian writing can now stand alongside any other example of world literature. And today these literatures, in turn, can stand together as an answer to the instability of the world’s superpowers.

Nora Ikstena

Nora Ikstena is one of the most prominent and influential prose writers in Latvia. Soviet Milk, shortlisted for the Annual Literature Award, Besa, Celebration of Life, and The Virgin’s Lesson are some of her best known novels. Ikstena is also a prolific author of biographical fiction, nonfiction, scripts, essays, and collections of short prose. Ikstena is co-founder of the International Writers and Translators’ House in Ventspils.
Regīna Ezera’s 1977 novel is a brilliant documentation of the decade while also presenting timeless themes and attitudes, expressed through a colourful and often surreal narrative. Ezera embellishes her somewhat conventional writing style with fantasy and humour, moving from subtle irony to parody and the grotesque, at the same time incorporating real psychological insights. This novel’s unique value, however, is hidden in its sixth part, which informs us as that all the previous parts were visions seen only by the author. Thus Ezera skilfully builds up and tears down the boundaries between space and time, and the real and the surreal, illuminating the liminal states between life and death, and the living and the dead. It’s no coincidence that while Regīna Ezera was writing Smoulder in the East, in the West Tony Morrison was writing Song of Solomon.

The title of Belševica’s 1969 poetry collection – Annual Rings – holds special meaning, connecting with the ontology of Goethe’s Faust, which as a fundamental principle examines the expressed meaning and power of words as well as their relationship with actions. Words always serve a purpose, even when we only use a few of them. One word has the power to create, preserve and set free: it cannot be erased, it turns back time. The conflict between words and the period in which they’re used illustrates the relationships between truth and power, between freedom and oppression – as shown in the poem ‘The notes of Henry the Latvian on the margins of the Livonian Chronicle’, which describes the illusory nature of an artist’s freedom. By drawing a dramatic parallel between truth and lies in this way, and by revealing the harsh nature of reality, Belševica’s work relates to events in our time: Latvians continue to enact the will of foreign powers, either consciously or subconsciously.
Eriks Ādamsons’ 1937 collection of short stories is among the earliest works of short, Latvian modernist prose. It portrays humans as internally disharmonious beings, powerless before their subconscious and neuroses, their rational desires interrupted by random thoughts and irrational whims, all of this both deeply buried and liable to erupt in the most troubling and capricious ways. Ādamsons’ short prose confirms that modernism had arrived in Latvian fiction, placing the unusual, subjective, accidental, strange and ephemeral at the centre, but refraining from dispensing moral wisdom.
This is a novel of the senses and although I was initially annoyed by the nameless mother and daughter, and the shifting timelines and alternating voices, weeks after I read it Soviet Milk still clings to me like a lover. This is because it’s a triumph, for Peirene Press and the translator as well as the author. It works on so many levels: as history narrated by individuals; as a portrait of village life; as a depiction of a heart-breaking mother-daughter relationship and of mental breakdown. Sensually intense and dense, you can hear and smell everything: the hops, the blood, disinfectant and medicines, the daughter’s school year beginning ‘during the beetroot and carrot season’, the apples and black rye bread, the milk. Soviet Milk.

What a perfect title: the strongest smell and taste of all – mother’s milk, the source of life, but in the life of this troubled mother and her occupied country, it is toxic: ‘My milk was bitter: the milk of incomprehension, of extinction.’

The two interwoven, first-person narratives of mother and daughter begin sequentially, one in 1944 and one in 1969. ‘Moments of great darkness were relieved by occasional rays of light’. After 1944 and the Nazi and Soviet occupations, after witnessing her own father’s wartime suffering, after the death camps and deportations, the mother decides to become a doctor. She has been raised as a loyal Soviet citizen by her own mother, ‘Yet within me blossomed a hatred for the duplicity and hypocrisy of this existence’ – which she never shakes off.

When she gives birth herself, she rejects the baby (Nora) and disappears for several days. The daughter is weaned on camomile tea...
and retains a life-long dislike of milk:

‘Those were my worst trials at school. In our country school drinking milk was obligatory. I hated milk and all that was associated with it. I struggled with it as if with an invisible devil trying to possess me.’

Mother and daughter both live hypocritical lives under communism, compromising themselves to unbearable degrees. The child adapts, learns Russian, sings patriotic songs, all the while caring for her chain-smoking, sozzled mother, willing her to stay alive but knowing she is being sucked into ‘life’s quagmire’. There is little sentimentality but it’s heart-breaking nonetheless. The gifted mother battles with the roles of religion (or lack of it), science and medicine under communism. She is pioneering in her field of in vitro fertilisation, and briefly rides the crest of Soviet ambition, only to be thwarted by Soviet treachery.

After reading Soviet Milk you understand how the book ‘took the Baltics by storm’, as claimed by its publisher. We cannot possibly feel the same patriotic rush as the Latvians do about this novel, but we can get very close.

Rosie Goldsmith
I don’t remember 15 October 1969. There are people who swear they remember their birth. I don’t. It’s likely that I was well positioned in my mother’s womb because the birth was normal. Not particularly long, nor particularly short, with the last contractions coming every five minutes. My mother was twenty-five, young and healthy. Her mental state, though, was not so healthy, as I learned later.

I do remember, or at least I can picture, the golden, tender calm of October, alternating with forebodings of a long period of darkness. It’s a kind of boundary month, at least in the climate of this latitude, where seasons change slowly and autumn only gradually gives way to winter.

Probably leaves were falling, and our bad-tempered concierge raked them up in the courtyard. She had come from Kyrgyzstan with her family and been allocated a flat in our building at 20 Mičurina Street. Her slant-eyed little girl sat on the windowsill, slurping borscht and cheerfully inviting everyone into their flat. The pre-war grandeur inside the flat had been modified to reflect the Kyrgyz woman’s idea of beauty. The previous inhabitants, a Jewish family, had abandoned the flat in 1941, when deportation to Siberia saved them from having to wear the yellow stars on their backs a few months later in Nazi-occupied Riga. Now heavy rugs covered the parquet, the porcelain dishes were filled with sunflower seeds and spittoons stood on the piano lid. Times and religions had commingled. And that’s how it was in the entire building, where I
was carried up to the thirteenth flat, carefully swaddled like a chrysalis, as the
custom was in those times.

Now and then I have a dream from which I wake feeling sick. I’m clinging
to my mother’s breast and trying to suck on it. The breast is large, full of milk,
but I can’t get any out. I don’t see my mother, she doesn’t help me, and I’m left
to struggle with her breast on my own. But suddenly I succeed and a bitter,
repulsive liquid spurts into my mouth. I gag and wake with a start.

My mother was a young doctor. Perhaps she knew that her milk would
have caused more harm than good to her child. How else to explain her
disappearance from home immediately after giving birth? She was missing for
five days. She returned with aching breasts. Her milk had stopped flowing.

In despair my grandmother fed me camomile tea for two days. Then she went
to the infant clinic. The suspicious doctor berated her in Russian and insulted my
mother for abandoning me. But eventually he wrote out a note authorising my
grandmother to receive infant milk formula for me.

During the twenty years that I lived with my mother, I wasn’t able to ask her
why she had deprived me of her breast. I wasn’t able to because I didn’t yet know
she had. Anyway, it would have been an inappropriate question because, as it
turned out, I was forced to become her mother.

*I*

I don’t remember 22 October 1944. But I can reconstruct it. Riga has just been
liberated from the Nazis. Bombs have shattered the maternity ward’s windows.
It is damp and cold, and the women who have just given birth helplessly wrap
themselves in their bloodied sheets. Exhausted nurses and doctors are bundling
up dead newborns and drinking as they work. An epidemic that everyone is
calling nasal typhoid fever is raging through the hospital. Sounds of wailing,
bombs whistling in the air and, through the windows, the smell of burning. My
mother has sneaked me out of the ward, bound to her chest, and is squirting her
milk into my nose. Pus, milk and blood together drip from my tiny nose. I gag and
breathe, gag and breathe.

Then there is silence. A horse pulls a wagon on a sunny autumnal road from
Riga to Babīte in the outskirts. My father stops several times to allow my mother
to feed me. I no longer gag but breathe calmly and greedily suck my mother’s
milk. In the Babīte forest district we have a lovely house, barely furnished and
without a cradle, but my mother makes up a bed for me in a suitcase.

Each morning my father inspects his young spruce trees. When Christmas
arrives, a heavy lorry full of soldiers roars into the courtyard. They shout in a
language my parents don’t understand, jump out from the vehicle and begin to
fell the young spruce trees. My father locks my mother and me in the back room,
where she hides me in a suitcase pierced with holes so I can breathe. Then he
runs out of the house yelling ‘Bastards, scoundrels!’ in an attempt to save his
trees. The soldiers beat him until he bleeds and throw him into the back of the lorry with the hewn trees. They search the house, banging at all the doors. Holding her breath, my mother crouches in a wardrobe in the locked room, holding the suitcase with me inside it on her knees. The soldiers are ransacking the house, the noise is horrendous. Finally all grows quiet and we listen to the sound of the engine as they drive away.

Towards morning my mother climbs out of the wardrobe. She feeds me, ties me to herself, dresses warmly and heads back to Riga on foot. It is late evening when we arrive at our flat on Tomsona Street, soon to be renamed Mičurina Street. My mother is exhausted but she still has to tape over the windows shattered by bombs during an air raid. Otherwise we would both freeze.

Nora Ikstena

Translated by Margarita Gailitis

Poet and translator Margita Gailitis was born in Latvia and emigrated to Canada as a child. In 1998, she returned to Riga, Latvia, and has focused her energies on literary translation and poetry, translating some of Latvia’s finest writers. She has published her own poetry, receiving awards from both the Canada Council for the Arts and the Ontario Arts Council.
The Book of Riga does much more than transport the reader to Latvia’s capital. Part of Comma Press’s ‘Reading the City’ series, which focuses not just on individual locations, but on urban themes, this collection examines both what has made the city the place it is today and what its future holds.

In fact, the dominant perspective through which these ten stories examine Riga is that of time. The opening story, ‘Westside Garden’ by Gundega Repse, explores the lives of two women living in the same house in the Kaiserwald forest: one growing up there in the mid-twentieth century, the other sharing her house in the present day. Between these two moments, of course, sits the Soviet occupation.

The occupation also sits between two separate stories that share a specific location: Brīvības Street in central Riga. Andra Neiburga’s ‘Where Am I’ is an impressionistic sketch of middle-class life on the street at the beginning of the twentieth century; while at its end, Arno Jundze’s ‘Killing Mrs Cecīlīja Bočs’ sees a nephew trying to benefit from his aunt’s newly reclaimed property – flats the Soviets had once nationalised. This story is a long complaint – the reader is sure the narrator will fail to inherit, despite his attempts to end his aunt’s life. In fact he is successful; his problem is that ‘I believed that if I had money then I’d finally start to feel like a person … But that feeling didn’t come, and still hasn’t’. The Soviets are gone; Latvian independence has been restored, yet free, autonomous life is oddly unsatisfying.

This feeling is alluded to in another time-travelling tale, ‘The Girl Who Cut My Hair’ by Kristīne Želve. On the way to church with her friends – they seem to go not because they are pious; more because they now can – the narrator meets a girl with a ‘Soviet-produced man’s wristwatch’ on a blue ribbon. Ten years later, during which time the narrator has grown her short hair long – apparently in an attempt to regain her old life, ‘the way it was before’ – she meets the same girl in a hair salon, and ‘she turned from The Girl with a Watch on the Blue Ribbon into The Girl Who Cut My Hair’.

The meaning of this tale is elliptical – the emphasis is on the time it took the narrator to grow her hair. So
what exactly is she searching for? What kind of future does she want? Is it the hope and prosperity symbolised by ‘The Castle of Light’ – the shining new National Library building in Ilze Jansone’s searingly ironic ‘Wonderful New Latvia’. Or is it the claustrophobic suburbs of Dace Rukšāne’s ‘The Birds of Kipsala Island’ – the last story in the collection – which, to all intents and purposes could be located anywhere in the Western, capitalist world.

Thus The Book of Riga ends as it starts, with a story of two women and one house. But the future is unclear. According to the second woman, the small semi-detached home, with neat lawns and nosy neighbours ‘has been waiting exactly for my children and me’. Is this because the previous occupant has painted it with birds ‘it will take half a lifetime to get to know’? Or is it because ‘most families in the West live in just the same way’.

Riga, it seems, is at a crossroads, and its writers are imagining several futures.

West Camel

Becca Parkinson joined Comma Press as a marketing and production assistant straight from finishing her degree at Lancater University. While at university she was the editor of both Cake Magazine and Flash Journal. She is currently Comma’s sales and production manager, and oversees their literary events. She is also the co-editor of The Book of Tbilisi.

Eva Eglāja-Kristsone is lead researcher at the Institute of Literature, Folklore and Art at the University of Latvia. She is the author of Connectors of the Latvian and Western Exile Writers which won the Special Award in Latvian Literature in 2015.
In short, I lost my job and didn’t find a new one.
Wherever I tried to worm my way in:
‘Sorry, you’re too old.’
The bank took away my house, my wife left me, my daughters, well ... go
reread King Lear, or our own Kārlis Skalbe’s The Cat’s Mill – that’s how they acted.
So then I decided to end it – loudly! I’d slam the door to the void with a bang!
But before I left, I’d say everything that was on my mind, and directly – I didn’t
need the media, a TV debate or an internet forum interfering. They won’t shut
my mouth.

I wandered aimlessly through Riga, looking for a place. The right place. The
Freedom Monument? One guy already shot himself there. Does anyone still
remember his name? The Vanšu Bridge? No, perhaps not, they’d trick me into
coming down – their budget has enough money for that, they’d send a smart-ass
psychologist, firemen... But the tower of St Peter’s Church? The correct choice,
sir, congratulations! That evening, with a backpack on my shoulders and my
ticket in hand, I rode up to the tower’s viewing platform. I listened a moment
while a guide explained something to Japanese tourists, then crept off behind
their backs to climb one storey higher up the metal stairs. To be closer to the
golden rooster weather vane and to God.

I spent the night in a sleeping bag. In the morning I stood at the edge of the
platform and, to attract attention, started waving my arms. At first one passer-by
raised their head, then others. Soon enough a fairly large crowd of people had
gathered below. A police car drove up, then firemen and a crane. Striped tape
was set up around the base of the tower.

I took the notepad with my prepared speech out of my backpack and raised
my hand in greeting. I opened my mouth and – sssh! I could only whisper. My
throat had closed up. I’d caught a cold, sleeping on the stone floor.
I tore the page out of my notepad, folded it into a paper aeroplane, and released it into the air. Circling, my declaration glided downward. A tall police officer jumped up and caught it. His commanding officer yanked the paper out of his hand, took a look at it and, folding it carefully, stuck it in the pocket of his uniform. He gave his subordinates an order. They formed a chain and shifted the crowd farther away from the church. Neither outrage nor desperately flashing press IDs were any good, the police let no one near. So I stood up there, waved my arms like a ghost, tore pages out of the notepad, scribbled this and that, folded paper aeroplanes and sent them down. A few ended up in the cops’ clutches, spectators collected others, and that was it. Nothing happened. No revolution began.

One after another, both officials and psychologists tried to talk me down. A unit of men in bullet-proof vests tried to storm the tower, but my poster near the platform – LANDMINES! – stopped them. And then they just got bored. Even a helicopter didn’t help – it got tangled in electrical wires and crashed next to the Laima Clock, flattening the Lamborghini parked there. There were no casualties, thank God; the car, unfortunately, was insured.

My humble food supply ran out in a few days. With a packet of Selga cookies and the remnants of my mineral water, I could last one more day – two, at best.

What next? Should I jump to the ground and shatter? Sneak down in the dark of night, let them take me to the nuthouse and feed me medicines? A splatter or a vegetable – not a lot of choices. What was holding me back? Arrogance? The desire not to disappoint my fans down there?

The crowd, always changing, grew. There were even bets being made – will he jump or not? Whole buses full of people came. I’d become a sensation, a tourist attraction and, to brag a bit, for much longer than Andy Warhol’s promised fifteen minutes.

I wasn’t bored. At night I could watch the city lights and gaze at the stars.

Juris Zvirgzdiņš

Translated by Mārta Ziemelis

Juris Zvirgzdiņš has written more than twenty books for children. His works have received many awards, and have been translated into several languages. His children’s book Muffa: Story of the White Baby Rhinoceros was included in the prestigious White Ravens Catalogue in 2012 in Bologna.

Mārta Ziemelis is a translator and poet, who was born in Germany and grew up there and in the Middle East. She translates from Latvian, French and Italian to English. Her poetry was first published in the literary journals UC Review and Garm Lu. Her first novel-length translation, The Water of Life by Daniel Marchildon, was published by Odyssey Books in July 2015.
When Jacob, a young, rather lonely city boy with a big imagination, learns he’s going to have to spend his summer in a distant suburb with a strange cousin he doesn’t know, he’s sure his dad must be punishing him for something. (For saying the wrong thing and inadvertently causing the entire city of Riga to be submerged under water? Perhaps.)

But Maskatchka, his new temporary home, is totally unlike anything he’s imagined. His cousin Mimi is tough, sharp-tongued and independent – Jacob would never have gone out alone to play in the street back home, preferring to stay inside drawing his amazing maps – and his burly uncle Eagle is an ex-sailor who used to fight pirates! (Well, if you believe his stories he did.) The whole place is shabbily, wonderfully alive, and quite different to the dull life Jacob is used to, right down to a local pack of rare talking dogs.

Wait ... what?

So when Jacob and Mimi unearth a plan by ruthless local ‘businessman’ Skyler Scraper to raze Maskatchka to the ground and replace it with tarmac and a forest of high-rise buildings, they and the dogs decide they need to do something about it: and so Operation Free Maskatchka is born. Both Jacob and Mimi will learn a lot about themselves and each other before the story is up, and there’s a political message for readers, too, about what matters most in life (clue: it’s not always money), and what it means to be a child.

Dog Town is a charming middle-grade adventure, full of plot surprises, wisdom and quirky humour. It’s Pastore’s debut in English, and I hope there’ll be a lot more to come.

Daniel Hahn

Luīze Pastore lives in the Latvian countryside and teaches creative-writing workshops for children. As well as prizes for Dog Town, Luīze has also received several major awards for her ‘Art Detectives’ series.

Reinis Pētersons is an award-winning professional illustrator, film animator and visual artist. He lives and works in Riga.
**THE GREEN CROW** by KRISTĪNE ULBERGA  
**Translated by ŽĀNETE VĒVERE PASQUALINI** (PETER OWEN PUBLISHERS, 2018)  
**Reviewed by ANNA BLASIAK**

Reading this book is like plunging head-first into deep water. You don’t know what awaits – either in the depths, or even right under the surface. You quickly learn, however, that you should expect anything and everything. There are moments when you swim smoothly through long passages, and these almost lull you. But then a sentence attacks you, jumping at you suddenly. For example: ‘I fall asleep without washing my hands after the colonoscopy of our life.’ You need to slow down and swim around these obstructions, checking them from different angles, before you can continue.

The six-year-old protagonist of Kristīne Ulberga’s book spends her time sitting in front of a switched-off TV, watching a ‘film’ about a forest – an idyllic, friendly place (‘no red ants, no rabid beasts’), where clothes always fit perfectly, and one can’t get lost. One day, while the narrator is busy building an imaginary house of branches and pine fronds, her mother returns home, bringing her lover with her. The three of them go on a trip to the coast and the girl is told not to mention anything about it to her father. She comes home with her pockets ‘full of tiny, bewitched people who have committed evil deeds. Some have a hole in their chests, some have a seashell growing into their heads’.

She does tell her father about the trip, and the result is he beats her mother up. As the assaulted woman lies on the floor weeping, he also lies on the floor in his daughter’s room, drunk. And the Green Crow appears for the first time.

The Green Crow is the narrator’s imaginary friend and perfect companion – her alter ego; the ‘forest’ part of her. The bird remains by the protagonist’s side until the day when she starts embarrassing her. The narrator then tries to hide the bird away, pretending she doesn’t exist and never has. But the result of repressing the forest/bird side of her personality means our narrator ends up in a psychiatric institution. There she retells moments from her life story to her roommates, such as this one, in which she recalls her mother cutting her wings off:

> ‘Your great-great-grandmother cut off your great-grandmother’s wings, your great-grandmother your grandmother’s, your grandmother mine and I shall cut off yours, my mother said as she did so, feather by feather.’

This book reads like a layered cake, with tasty poetic jam oozing out between the layers: ‘The fat woman stops and stares at me, questioningly. Her hands clench into fists. Her chest clenches into a fist. Her eyes are drawn into fists.’ It
is a story about seeking and discovering oneself and one’s freedom, but also of seeking love and happiness, which sometimes means denying oneself exactly the freedom and/or happiness one has sought: ‘I have to be miserable for my family to love me. Wonderful people are not loved; happiness is despised. I was happy once, but then all my loved ones grew unhappy.’

The Green Crow is surreal, absurd and oneiric, and ruled by a certain childlike logic. Take the plunge and see what happens; but be warned: it might hurt...

Anna Blasiak

Anna Blasiak is an art historian, poet and translator. She runs the European Literature Network with Rosie Goldsmith. She has worked in museums and a radio station and written on art, film and theatre.

Kristīne Ulberga is a Latvian novelist best known for her young adult fiction, The Virtual Angel, and I Don’t Read Books. The Green Crow is her first novel for adults and won the Raimonds Gerkens Prize and the Annual Latvian Literature Prize.

18 by PAULS BANKOVSKIS
Translated by IEVA LEŠINSKA
(VAGABOND VOICES, 2017)
Reviewed by JONATHAN LEVI

Nations are sometimes defined by borders, but more interestingly by language. Latvia is thus defined by a language spoken by fewer than two million people worldwide; that’s less than half the number who speak Lithuanian, the only other surviving Baltic language.

A century after Stravinsky and Hasek were inspired by 1918 and the end of WWI, the Latvian Pauls Bankovskis has written his own soldier’s tale about a crucial moment in Latvian independence: 18 November 1918. His novel 18 memorialises – in many senses of the word – that date, when, in the chaos of the German defeat and the Russian Civil War, Latvia declared its independence. One storyline follows a young Latvian soldier, barely eighteen, who wanders between the lines, trying to bring some focus to patriotic hope.

But 18 (translated by Ieva Lešinska, an intrepid soldier herself, who also translates English-language poets like Heaney and Frost into Latvian) is more than the chronicle of a lone teenager sent out into the countryside to scout the enemy. One hundred years after the event, a young
descendant of the soldier, cleaning out his family cabin in the woods, discovers a digital camera in the pocket of his dead grandfather’s greatcoat. Improbably, a memory chip in the camera has survived the many years since 1918. It shows images of a newer cabin, a younger forest, an age decades gone. More than just an anachronism, the memory chip acts as a viewfinder on the grandfather’s meditations on memory. Back in 1918, just a couple of years after Einstein’s description of relativity, the soldier muses:

‘whether we compare the location of events in time to cards, pancakes, onion layers or tree rings, we’re describing hypothetical intersections in which our movement through time pierces through the sequential reality of space and, at least theoretically, allows one to be at the same place at different times and at the same time in two or more places.’

Bankovskis published 18 in Latvia in 2014, shortly after the Russian annexation of Crimea. He has no illusions about the permanence of Latvian independence. The country that declared its sovereignty on 18 November 1918 was incorporated into the Soviet Union at the beginning of WWII and was batted back and forth by the Soviets and the Nazis for the next five years, before becoming the Latvian Socialist Republic for the next fifty. The Russification of Latvia under Stalin meant, among other things, that the Latvian language went into severe decline. More than one-quarter of today’s population is made up of ethnic Russians, many of whom do not speak Latvian.

The forty-four year old Bankovskis has written ten novels (his 2012 Reds, Rats, & Rock ‘n’ Roll is about to appear in English as well), many of them pondering the history of Latvia. ‘Whenever we go to the country, we start to clean’, Bankovskis opens 18, ‘and when we leave, all is order and cleanliness. Yet when we return, we have this irresistible urge to straighten everything out even more than before.’ This is as good as any description of Bankovskis’ novelistic mission, and perhaps even that of his Baltic nation caught between east and west – the endless straightening out of history with the broom of Sisyphus.

Jonathan Levi


Writer and journalist Pauls Bankovskis studied glasswork at the Riga School for Applied Arts as well as philosophy at the University of Latvia. He has published ten novels and two collections of short stories, as well as an award-winning children’s book and a nonfiction work. 18 was first published as part of a series of historical novels entitled ‘We, Latvia. The 20th Century’.
My mother is an attractive woman. And judging by all the glances she still gets from men, she’s just as charming now as ever. She was more beautiful in her youth, of course, but most mothers were.

If memory serves, she didn’t rush to find a new husband after my father disappeared. She kept on quietly shelving books in the library, until one day a German named Volfangs Vengers showed up. A Balto-German, to be more precise. With roots in Latvia, but without branches or shoots. The other librarians watched in amazement as this young man started to check out books almost every other day. How could one person read that quickly? Mum wasn’t surprised; she understood. It didn’t take him long to propose, just a few dates to the movies, the opera and some art exhibitions. Mr Vengers was nice, cultured, and my mother married a second time without much objection. She must have been tired of being in the widows’ club. Sometimes I get really jealous seeing how much Mum and Volfangs care about each other. But it’s no surprise, seeing as my own interactions with women so far have ended only in total failure.

At first I wasn’t a fan of the lean Kraut; I had a wall up. But then I either grew up or else the German grew more good-natured, and eventually we became friends. He’s a sensible person to talk to. And a cartographer. Volfangs, or Volfiņš, Volfitis, as Mum calls him, or Volfs, as I call him, helped renovate the
home Mum’s parents built, and that’s where we still live. The smallish, but very neat manor house is between Irbenes Street and the pension on Ģimnastikas Street. After high-school graduation they let me move into the attic suite. We’re all under one roof, but I still have my own space to be in. I think it’s a pretty cosy setup.

* 

In the evenings, after I’ve washed away the sweat and dust from work, I go down to eat dinner with Mum and Volfs. We have our routine; I help Volfgangs stack and chop wood, pump and bring in water, till the garden if needed, and wring out the laundry on Saturdays because I have the strongest hands. I go to the store if they ask me, do a few other chores around the house, and pay Mum fifty lats a month so I can eat breakfast and dinner with them with a clear conscience. In short, life is good and I want for nothing.

* 

I’m a little late tonight; Volfs is already getting up from the table and going into the other room to listen to the radio. Mum sets a deep dish in front of me and takes a soup tureen out of the oven.

—Koļa thinks things are going south, I say without any pretense, but Mum misunderstands me.

—How come? You’ve always made it work. Did something happen?

—No, everything with work is fine. He’s worried about Europe. Poland, the Germans, the Russians … the British… He doesn’t think any of it is going to reach us.

—I wouldn’t know. And – here Mum lets out a heavy sigh – nor do I want to know. Koļa can talk to Volfgangs about it.
“Object”

—How was school? Mīma asks, like always, and helps take off the heavy back-pack. What’s in here, rocks? How was your day?
—Good, Laura answers, like always.
—Could you say a little more than that? What am I supposed to get out of a single word? Mīma isn’t satisfied.
—Aivars almost choked me to death! Laura adds happily. She actually had a really great day.
But what had been so great about it?
—All the teachers were sick. With the flu.
Ah. Then it really had been a great day. Mīma is happy. She’s made soup with dried apples and dumplings.

Laura has to finish her homework. She has to finish it. It’s odd. No one else has to finish work, they just do it. Mīma doesn’t have to finish carrying water in from the well. Mīma doesn’t have to finish lighting the stove. Mīma doesn’t have to finish making the soup. No one else has to finish homework. Except for Laura! To finish – it sounds far more important than just doing.
—Mīma, when are you going to make cranberry moss again?
—Cranberry what? I don’t know what that is.
—Yes you do. We had it Sunday.
—Sunday? You mean cranberry mousse?
—Yes, cranberry mousse.
—Good thing you brought it up. I was just thinking that we should have something for dessert. You’re papa will be home tonight.
—Really? Laura pushes her chair back and jumps around with joy. Yay! Yay! Papa! Papa!
—Oh my cranberry mousse! Mīma sighs.
If only Papa would come home sooner! That arithmetic homework. Laura breezes through everything else at school, but not arithmetic. Those word problems. There are seven tables in the cafeteria. Each table has four chairs. A group of seven students from one class comes in and sits down. How many empty chairs are left? Laura can’t figure it out. What if they all sit down at one table? What if they push all the tables together? Then there’s one, big, communal table. And what does it mean that all seven students are from one class? Why exactly seven of them? Like the seven dwarves, seven goats, seven days in a week. There has to be some meaning to it all. A trap. Laura’s thoughts dart around like bats in a cave. Her throat hurts.
—Mīma!
—What now.
—What’s an ‘object’?
—An object? The table, for example. Or your ruler. There are objects all around. Objects everywhere. Dishes. Slippers.
—Slippers! That can’t be right.
—How so?
—The Communist Party object. What’s that?
—Objective. Mercy!
—What kind of object is that? Laura presses Mīma.
—Do your homework and stop talking nonsense!
—Mīma!
—I have to check if that dough is finally going to rise or not, if I’ll be able to bake any pīrāģi tonight.
Mīma is cross. Another bad batch of yeast. She’s also a little embarrassed; Laura can sense it. Maybe she shouldn’t have asked those questions. Maybe Mīma is embarrassed to admit that she doesn’t know what the Communist Party objective is. Maybe the adults don’t know, either. It makes Laura sad that Mīma is embarrassed by that. She could have just said she didn’t know, and that’s that. But Laura wants to know. Laura needs to know what she’s fighting for.

*Māra Zālīte

Translated by Kaija Straumanis

Māra Zālīte is a Latvian poet and playwright born during her family’s exile in Krasnojarsk, Siberia. She played an important part in the Latvian Awakening movement of 1990s and many of her plays are seen as iconic, such as her rock opera *Bearslayer*, based on the Latvian national epic, and her musical *The Chronical of Indriķis*. 
I was denied nothing. There were no books I wouldn't have been allowed to take from the shelves of my grandparents’ wide-ranging library! Age restrictions or other limitations did not exist. Why shouldn’t we let the little girl read everything! She’ll remember whatever she doesn’t yet understand and comprehend it later. My mother inculcated every new governess with this firm ideal (who initially still tried to apply the same restrictions all children were usually harnessed with). Similar rules applied for all areas of knowledge. It would have been unfitting not to have answered my questions as understandably, openly, and above all, logically.

I am grateful to my parents that from my birth on they considered me a being capable of thinking and making judgements. Because I was unfamiliar with any compulsion, moral prescriptions or mental restrictions, it was easy for me to accept that one must consider the feelings and needs of others and follow the rules of civilised interaction, what is called good manners. I thought of the traffic rules and that people cannot randomly speed down the street without causing chaos. Acquiring impeccable manners was like brushing your teeth at night. That was my governess’s responsibility. From my mother, in contrast, I learned to converse with other people in a way that they were not bored and sensed my authentic interest.

Many Riga acquaintances, solid, orderly citizens, were of the opinion that I was unbelievably pampered; the women also judged my mother exactly the same, presumably out of envy. But father adored us and was not capable of denying us anything, although this never concerned material escapades. I only spent my allowance (I could have coaxed a much higher sum from my father) on books, movies, and sweets. I have to admit that I was stubborn and unpredictable as a child and had a tendency to throw temper tantrums, most of
all when I felt people wanted to repress or overly restrict me. When I was still very small I bit the governess on her hand when she tried to force me to do something I didn’t want to do without explaining her order. One time, in a similar situation, I grabbed a couple of eggs and threw them against the kitchen wall. Mother did not give me a lecture, but just said: ‘How ugly and dumb.’ She regarded me with spiteful astonishment as if looking at a mooncalf who didn’t know how it had got there. Her beautiful grey-green eyes had extinguished and had become grey and cold like granite. She shrugged her shoulders, made a face, turned around, and left. Within seconds I understood how dumb, ridiculously, and unbecomingly I had acted – I did not want to become someone like that, at all costs. That was sufficient. From that moment on, I taught myself how I could achieve far more with self-control and an ‘eloquent’ look than other children could by yelling and screaming. Even years later, with differences of opinion about school or other matters, mother was wont to say: ‘We don’t do things like that.’ This ‘we’ pleased me tremendously – I wanted to belong and adopted the rules for my entire life.

Valentina Freimane

Translated by Bradley Schmidt

Valentina Freimane was a film and theatre scholar of Jewish origin. Born in Riga in 1922 into a lawyer’s family, she worked in pre-war Germany for the film studio UFA. After 1945 she graduated with a doctorate in art history and worked at the Latvian Academy of Sciences. Film critic and writer, she died in February 2018.

Bradley Schmidt translates contemporary German prose and poetry by authors including Ulrike Almut Sandig, Bernhard Schlink, Anna Kim and Lutz Seiler. He is currently translating the diaries of Peter Sloterdijk for Semiotext(e). Originally from Kansas, he is based in Leipzig, where he teaches writing and translation classes at Leipzig University.
The silk sheets were as soft as a woman’s skin – like Leonora’s warm, damp skin. The Actor turned to see what had woken him. Without yet opening his eyes, he heard a quiet, buzzing sound, a muffled metallic whisper – *whirrrrrrr* – and he understood that it wasn’t okay, that it wouldn’t be okay, he’s naked and between silk sheets, he’s awake too early, too late, he’s somewhere he isn’t supposed to be.

After he left Leonora in the hospital Peter had come back to ‘The Land of Plenty’, slid into his double bed and decided that if he could successfully fall asleep, then he could convert everything that had happened into a dream. Or at least not wake up.

But he wasn’t allowed to not wake up. The Actor opened his eyes and drowsily focused on the white skin, on the porcelain-white, smooth face that was much too close to his. Enormous brown plastic eyes with unnatural rainbow-like irises and blank pupils through which he could look deeper into darkness and muteness. Neat, chiselled cheekbones and well-formed lips that were just as indistinguishably white as the rest of the face. That was all. Just a face, the rest was sunk in the dark – but movements allowed him to sense where joints draped in black were moving against the black background of the stage’s ceiling. *Whirrrr*, the shoulder joint turned in an unnatural angle, a hand gently squeezed the Actor’s shoulder; out of the corner of his eye he saw this palm just as white as the face,
and coolness of this touch slowly seeped through the silk.

The Actor felt himself tremble, his teeth chattered, his palms were sweaty. A recently formed erection disappeared as if it had never existed, his testicles shrivelled painfully, trying to roll back into his body, into safety, further away from these porcelain hands. The Actor wanted to do the same, only he knew that he couldn’t let himself show it. He clenched his jaw so that he wouldn’t bite his tongue, and murmured, ‘I’m already awake, I’m awake.’

The mime put his left hand to his lips – hush. The Actor nodded. The mime stepped back, leading the Actor with him, and he wrapped himself in the silk sheets in order to conceal his nakedness.

The mime certainly didn’t care. The Actor couldn’t imagine that this mechanical thing could discern any substantial difference between nakedness and clothing. But he didn’t care. He was still a person, and he wanted to protect himself – even if it was with nothing more than a thin, sweat-soaked sheet. He went with the mime.

*Leva Melgalve*

*Translated by Suzanne McQuade*

Leva Melgalve is a popular Latvian writer of fantasy novels, science fiction, plays, and other prose genres. Three of her novels – *The Dead Won’t Forgive*, *Arrow, Star and Laee*, and *Moon Theatre* – were nominated for the Annual Latvian Literary Award.

Suzanne McQuade is a translator, writer, editor and photographer living in Cincinnati, Ohio. She is the translator of Inga Žolude’s novel *Warm Earth* and short-story collection *Solace For Adam’s Tree*, as well as short pieces and excerpts from works by Leva Melgalve, Iīze Jansone, and Elizabete Eglīte.
The next day he headed out on his own. The walk seemed much shorter, no longer impeded by the whims of the child. He walked through a neighbourhood of silent mansions – at that early hour everyone was still asleep – past the nursing home for dementia patients, the abandoned stadium, the large rose garden, and the playground, and sought out the cobblestone path. The cobbles were covered in dew. Everything was quiet and heavy with the wetness that pattered in the leaves and grass. Carver climbed up the hill just as he had yesterday. He pictured the photograph Astija had taken of his back – there he stood, having arrived on his own life’s path up to this point, as if he’d emerged from a tunnel. A tunnel thirty-six years long, in which he had evolved from a babbling lump into a person who had created a new person who in turn would create more new people fifteen or twenty-five years later. Endless tunnels. He has lived up to the expectations of his parents, friends and acquaintances, and ultimately those of critics, and Joyce. And now he’s finally come out of the tunnel and into the light. Mentally, in Astija’s photograph, he turned his face to the lens and looked at his observer – yes, I am just as you see me. There’s been so much. And I don’t know what is yet to come, maybe nothing. But I’m going. And he headed straight down the slope of the road. On the bend where the road turned sharply, Carver stopped and looked back. The street beyond the hill was no longer visible. He went along the middle of the road, the stones were dark and covered with dirt, drenched and slick, here and there the foliage shook almost imperceptibly, drops of dew merging into one large drop and falling. Carver wiped a drop of water from his hair. There began a dense hedge of fir trees, their tops lopped off straight, like a wall. Carver stopped to listen, casting a glance around. For a moment he grew completely uncomfortable. Here in this early morning he was completely alone. Anything could happen, and there was no one with him who could save him from it or join him in it. He couldn’t hear anything. He started to walk again, breathing deeply,
and immediately stopped again – he seemed to make out the sound of some sort of motion beyond the hedge. Carver stepped into the patch of grass between the road and the hedge and felt the chill of the dew drenching his shoes. The fir trees had grown into each other, and you couldn’t see anything. He walked along the hedge, looking for a hole to peek through. The hedge was long, the ends of his pants were wet and clung coldly to his ankles. Carver returned to the road and, having walked further, he noticed some of the fir trees desiccated or likely destroyed by the snow and heat. There was all sorts of rubbish hanging in them – beads, faded and stretched neckties, postcards in plastic sleeves, Tibetan prayer flags, fairy lights and carnival masks with peeling faces. For a moment he stared at these decorations and couldn’t imagine who had thought to hang something like that here. He touched one of the neckties and turned it over, the tag was the only thing that wasn’t faded – on it was written ‘100% silk’. He let it go and touched the beads with his fingers.

—Please don’t take anything, said a voice.

Inga Žolude

Translated by Suzanne McQuade

Inga Žolude is the author of three novels – Warm Earth, Red Children and Santa Biblia, and two short story collections – Stories and Solace for Adam’s Tree, for which she received the European Union Prize for Literature.
It was on a publishers’ visit to Latvia in 2015 that we at Arc Publications first encountered Orbita. Intrigued by this group of Russian-speaking Latvian poets who appeared to be working completely independently from what was happening elsewhere in the Latvian poetry scene, Tony Ward, Arc’s founder and managing editor, arranged to meet them. Imagine his surprise to find that here were four poets – Semyon Khanin, Artur Punte, Vladimr Svetlov and Sergej Timofejev – who, working as a creative collective, were continuing the ideas of the UK ‘concrete’ poets of the 1960s and 1970s, published and promoted by Ward in the early days of Arc. What Orbita was creating in the twenty-first century was the sort of work that could have emerged from the British ‘concrete’ had it survived another fifty years into the technological age. Yet interestingly, the Orbita poets had no knowledge of the UK ‘concrete’ movement.

Orbita’s works can be described as a dialogue, with language as its base, between a wide range of artistic genres and cultures. The poets have produced a number of printed ‘almanacs’, which are designed to appear side by side with visual art (photography, graphic work and painting). They have also organised five festivals of poetry, video and multimedia art in Latvia, and issued two poetry CDs and a collection of poetry videos. In addition, they have created several multimedia poetry installations for public exhibition, produced a number of bilingual (Russian-Latvian) poetry collections and publications, and have even issued an anthology of contemporary Russian poetry in Latvia – a unique study of this phenomenon. Members of the group have been published in many European countries and are frequently invited to European literary and artistic festivals across the continent. In 2015 their installation 2 Sonnets from Laputa was included in the Venice Biennial Collateral events programme.

To celebrate the Baltic Countries Market Focus at the 2018 London Book Fair, Arc is putting together a portfolio of some of Orbita’s most striking work in the form of a printed book and an associated website, under the title Orbita: The Project. The book, which
comprises a selection of poems by the four Orbita poets, has within it QR codes that link to a website where a wide range of Orbita’s poetry installations, multimedia films and visuals can be viewed. Add to this live performances in the UK by the Orbita poets during the Market Focus year, and British audiences will have the opportunity of experiencing a new and vibrant poetic.

Angela Jarman

Angela Jarman joined Arc Publications in 1994 having previously run her own academic microform publishing business, Altair Publishing. Originally from a musical background, she was the moving force behind the Arc Music imprint in 1998. She works alongside Tony Ward running Arc, her main areas of responsibility being pre-press and marketing.

Days of Angels
by Orbita poet, Sergej Timofejev

Angels are very slow dudes
Who smoke through cupped hands some sort of
Chocolate-flavoured cigarettes.
They twiddle their thumbs
Up there in the sky.
The clouds smell like vanilla,
And everything’s so clean, safe, and well maintained,
Like breakfast in an aircraft,
Parked in an airport,
For eternity.
Once in a while they watch old action films
And think, well we could also do...
Then they go somewhere together,
Just a little downcast.
They get there – it’s a garden,
And they walk among the apple trees, plucking
Fruits from the tree of knowledge of good
And evil. They bite down. Munch away. For them
It’s harmless, just like everything else.
One day passes; another dawns.
And they watch action films again on a TV
The size of the sky.

Translated by Kevin M. F. Platt, Julia Bloch, Maya Vinokour, Sergej Timofejev
while I was asleep at the wheel
and hit a deer
you were all sitting in the
back reeling off jokes
and telling stories of the comical
misunderstandings during your trips
it seemed like a dream until your brother
called me and said that I’d have to pay for
the paint job
light cheerful music was playing
as if nothing was going to happen
and now a beautiful brown creature will never
crunch sweet spring sprouts anymore

oh what a feast we had
with venison olives marinated steaks and classic
delicious cutlets in different sauces
and potatoes with the hidden happiness inside flooded the guests’ faces
if I were a deer I’d be delighted in
this surprisingly practical approach to death

Krišjānis Zeļģis

Translated by Jayde Will

Krišjānis Zeļģis is not only a poet, but has also been a metalworker, baker and librarian. He now lives in Riga and works as a brewer, enjoying bouldering in his spare time. This broad experience inspires and informs his writing. Zeļģis’s first collection All Those Things was published in 2010, and nominated for several awards.
She loves so demandingly
wanting to prove she isn’t a mistake
on the map of the world
sticking her stories into the cracks
of the house’s fissured wall
She demonstrates so desperately
that she is good
She traces protective symbols on scarred faces
promising eternal success and immortality
She lets them climb on and climb off
Lets them sweep in and not clean up
She draws an orange on her breasts, hands over darts, and says:
Imagine it’s the sun
You’re not allowed to hit that bit
There won’t be anything to eat
RIVETING WRITING FROM THE BALTICS

A RIVETING BIBLIOGRAPHY OF TRANSLATIONS
BY STEPHEN WATTS

Since 1960 at least 320 individual translations into English from the three Baltic countries have been published. In other words, a minimum of 320 books of poetry and prose, by individual writers and as anthologies, have been published in English translation from Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian. This works out to an approximate average of 106 titles for each language. That may not sound like many – fewer than two titles per language per year over fifty-eight years – but it is probably more than many of us might suppose. 2018, with the Baltic countries Market Focus at this year’s London Book Fair, is projected to add at least twenty-five more titles.

Below is a selected, partial bibliography of these translations published since 2010, concentrating on some of the most recently published books and on what might still be in print or obtainable from bookshops. The past ten years have seen increasing momentum in what has been published in translation, reflecting both a greater interaction between the various cultural offices of each country and more willingness from English-language publishers to publish fiction and poetry from the Baltic countries. Nevertheless, as is clear below, this often remains in the hands of a few dedicated translators and publishers.

This list inevitably misses out some great writers and many interesting works published in translation before 2010. Also, due to lack of space, I have not included the original titles and other information (these are, however, included in a larger bibliography that is not yet available online). It’s also worth noting that journals such as the Vilnius Review and organisations such as the Estonian Literature Centre also publish many translations.

Stephen Watts is a poet, editor and translator. In 2017 he was Translator in Residence at Southbank’s Poetry International (and National Poetry Library). His recent books include Republic of Dogs/Republic of Birds, which is being made into a film. He is also a bibliographer of modern and contemporary poetry and prose in translation.
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ANTHOLOGY
LITHUANIAN POETRY

ALIŠANKA, Eugenijus (b.1960)

BURIUKAS, Marius (b.1977)

BUTKUTĖ, Ižė (b.1984)

GRAUJUSKAS, Gintaras (b.1966)

IVANAUSKAITĖ, Jurga (1961–2007)

KATKUS, Laurynas (b.1972)

KAZILIŪNAIKĖ, Aušra (b.1987)

MARTINAITIS, Marcelijus (1936–2013)

PAULIULYTE, Sonata (b.1968)

PLATELIS, Kornelijus (b.1951)

VAIČIŪNAIKĖ, Judita (1937–2001)

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LITHUANIAN PROSE

ASKINYTĖ, Rasa (b.1973)

BORUTA, Kazys (1905–1965)

ČERNAUSKAITĖ, Laura Sintija (b.1972)

CVIRKA, Petras (1909–1947)

GAVELIS, Richardas (1950–2002)

KAZILIŪNAIKĖ, Aušra (b.1987)

MARTINAITIS, Marcelijus (1936–2013)

PAULIULYTE, Sonata (b.1968)

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