

FOUR LATVIAN VOICES

Foreign
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catalogue





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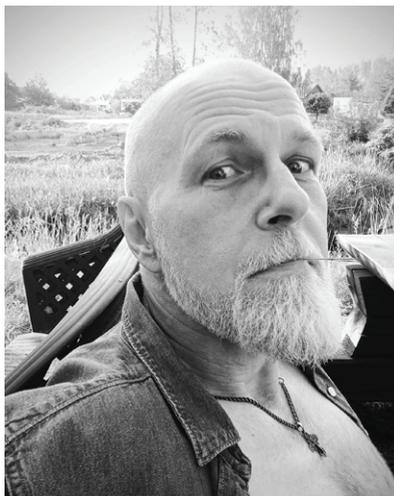
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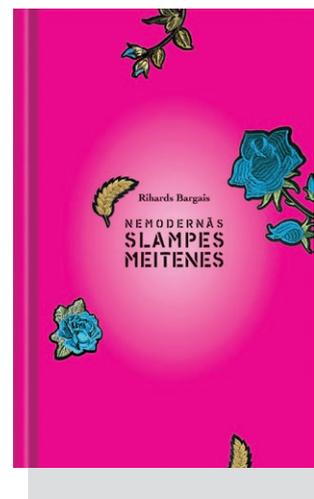
Founded in 2017, the book publishing house and art space Aminori has since become one of Latvia's leading publishers of high-quality books. It publishes original literature and poetry, as well as translated works, books for children and teenagers, and books on visual arts, theatre, cinema, and the history and culture of Latvia and Riga. The company's goal is to publish works of the highest quality that contribute to a better, more intellectual, and empathetic society. In 2024, Aminori joined the European Network of Cultural Centres (ENCC), broadening its engagement with cultural heritage and European cooperation projects, and enhancing its art space to champion wider cultural and artistic endeavours.



Rihards Bargais



Rihards Bargais (1969) is a Latvian poet and writer. He studied pedagogy and theology, and has worked various jobs, including in security, as a paramedic, and later as a courier and book layout designer at the publishing house Atēna. He was also the host of the television programme 100g of Culture. He began his literary career as a poet – his first collection, *Mīļvārdiņi* (Pet Names), was published in 2003, followed by the provocative collection *Labi* (Good) in 2005. Bargais's poetry is characterised by experimentation with irony, profanity, and nursery rhymes. Bargais's *Tenkas* (Gossip), which features various individuals associated with Latvian literature and culture, were published in a book in 2012, earning critical acclaim. In 2017, Rihards Bargais's second work of fiction, the autobiographical novel *Plikie Rukši* (Naked Oinkers), was published, challenging traditional narrative methods of the genre with its fragmentary structure. The book was nominated for the Latvian Literature Award in 2018. Bargais is known for his provocative literary style, which incorporates elements of harsh irony.



His autobiographical novel *Nemodernās Slampes meitenes* (2021) (The Unfashionable Girls from Slampe) carefully chooses words and expressions to examine, admire, sift through, and describe events in the author's life. Everything he has experienced is reflected in the text, ranging from moral and psychological decay to heartfelt, naïve faith. In his characteristic self-ironic and poignant tone, Bargais creates a unique mosaic that showcases his talent as a prose writer.

Absurd adventures, gossip, anecdotes and episodes from the lives of popular and marginal artists, neighbours, fellow travellers, parishioners, close friends, relatives, and loved ones are mixed with direct observation to create this colourful cocktail. Laughing at our roles and weaknesses, he does not criticise, but highlights the value and vulnerability of each person. He finds a place in his text for everyone he meets, interweaving references to the Bible and pop culture.

Autofiction for adults
Size 13,5 x 20,5 cm, 448 pages



Līdzfinansē
Eiropas Savienība



Kultūras ministrija

The Unfashionable Girls from Slampe by Rihards Bargais

Translated by Ieva Lešinska

I heard about Sasha's death in Brussels, where I had flown to visit friends for a few weeks and babysit their little kid. An acquaintance wrote that Sasha had begun to lose his memory, that he'd be wandering around the apartment blocks, unable to find his own, forgetting his name and how to eat. So he got dementia and died. The acquaintance could not say where he was buried. No one could. Neither former actors nor friends. Except perhaps his mother Zeltīte, but who knows where she is, probably dead too. The fact of his death didn't become known to anyone until six months later. I wrote to these friends and those friends, I asked, I inquired, but to no avail: the theories only multiplied. What memory loss, scoffed the actress Jana. He moved out of the apartment and into an Orthodox monastery, died there and is buried in the Orthodox cemetery in Liepāja! That sounded a bit more plausible, except for the fact that the monastery was in Jēkabpils, plumb at the other end of Latvia. Another acquaintance said, "What nonsense, what monastery, what Orthodox cemetery, he had a nervous breakdown, he worked in Norway with two crooks, took drugs for his nerves and washed them down with red wine! Anyway, he was dead as a doornail, and I wanted to light a candle in his memory, but I couldn't find an Orthodox church in Brussels. That's when I realized that I didn't like it there. What kind of a city is it where there is nowhere to put a candle?"

After wandering around empty pools with dried up dragon fountains, we started to go home but then suddenly it turned out that the kid had lost his little bag, his favorite little bag with dinosaurs, a birthday present. I don't remember where or how it could have got lost: the kid's mom carried it, I carried it, there were metro stations, trams, children's playgrounds. The mom got all worked up, we stopped, it was the one and only bag, a very special

bag, and then everything happened very quickly: I took the kid piggyback, his mom told us to walk down this street to the next intersection, and then take the parallel one, and she was off – back into the belly of Brussels to chase the lost bag.

The kid and I were left alone, and he immediately started crying. It was the kind of cry that excludes all alternatives, so I walked on with the wailing siren on my back, me, the bearded nanny-nanny, I just walking on, all resigned to my fate. Sometimes he would be quiet but then he would resume wailing. We had already crossed the first major intersection. I kept walking, wondering which was supposed to be the parallel street – the one we were walking on or the one that ran parallel to the one on our left. There seemed to be fewer and fewer houses, the lights were fading, and the street was widening while the windows on the opposite side were shrinking.

We seemed to have walked a whole kilometer, and yet there was no next intersection. In the half-light I saw an athletic black dad and his little black baby busy near a car. He was getting some things out of the back of his car. I approached him in English and asked for our street, but, sadly, he neither spoke the language nor knew of such an address, he just kept gesturing and saying something in a tongue unknown to me. The black dad must have left an impression on the kid, because he stopped wailing and just sat there on my shoulders quiet as a little mouse. We walked on until we came to a real wasteland – ahead was just an endless, empty colonnade lit by a few dim lamps. The yellowish, decrepit emptiness made me even more nervous than the encounter with the athletic dad.

I suspected from the beginning that if we went straight ahead we would get lost and go the wrong way, but we really had no choice: we had only this one street and this one direction. In my heart of hearts, I wasn't surprised, my whose life was like this – with no possibility to turn into some side street – and here we go again. The most important thing was that I could not be afraid in this situation: I had a child with me who needed a safe adult at his side. So I clung to his legs like a parachutist to a parachute rig and walked with determination. What else could I do?

When we were almost through the dreadful colonnade, I heard female

panting and hurried footsteps behind me. Hoping to see the kid's mom, I turned around with a happy, expectant expression on my face, only to see an anxious black woman running along, giving us the brief glance of a pursued fugitive and disappearing into the tunnel, the hem of her coat fluttering, disappeared into the tunnel like the White Rabbit in Wonderland.

Finally, traffic lights appeared in the distance and the embankment was replaced by half-collapsed, unlit shacks. Under the cover of darkness, minors were huddled near them, looking rather unfriendly. Some higher, some lower, perched like birds on wires, they stared at us with black hollow eyes, motionless and silent. It was late, about eleven at night, Allah was asleep, and the wind was roaring.

When we came to an intersection, I lost my last hope. The streets were overflowing like flooded rivers, their distant banks blackened by empty, ominous plazas. There were no options - going back into the tunnel was scary, going forward was scary too, so I found a niche in the wall of the nearest house and, hiding in it from the howling wind, called the kid's dad. The Brussels connection didn't inspire confidence, a few beeps, a few trills, followed by long silences, but at the last moment the dad picked up. The joy didn't last long, though - after a brief, vivid description of the place we were in, the phone went dead, but there was no feeling of being understood. I slid along the wall, took the baby between my knees like Charlie Chaplin takes his baby - big baby and little baby - and surrendered to fate. I stubbed out my cigarette, put my arms around him and held him protectively. We waited for daddy, what else could we do? Even though I didn't believe a word of it, I cheerfully told the kid how daddy would find us soon and that we would be home soon to watch a cartoon with naked oinkers. That was our nickname for the two Disney piggies who played and danced with their bare bottoms wiggling while the third one, dressed in blue pants, was building a fortress.

But then the dad rode his bike over and saved us. He had got it right, after all. A moment later, mom emerged from the lights of the big city. She hadn't found the lost bag, but the kid and I had apparently wandered into the most crime-friendly area of Brussels, and that colonnade was where the bums slept.

We walked home in the safe company of mom and dad, and like true locals, they knew the way. Every now and then, I'd break into a song: "Who's afraid of the big bad wolf, big bad wolf? - while the kid jumped up and down and yelled excitedly: "Naked oinkers! Naked oinkers!"

The kid became more and more inventive. He got into my lap, jumped up and down, then pulled my shirt out of my pants and stuck a finger in my bare belly: "What's that?" he asked. "Well, it's my fat belly!" I replied, feeling a bit unfomortable. I tucked the shirt back into my pants, but he pulled it out again, and pointed to my navel: "And what's that?" he asked, grinning mischievously, because he already knew what it was. I didn't have time to straighten my clothes before he took advantage of my confusion, pulled up his own shirt and fell on top of me, navel to navel, laughing like mad. - Punky, punky! - he cried. I'm stunned, this kid is molesting me. I thought, oh my God, when mom comes home from work, I better tell her everything.

When mom came home from work, she barely had time to catch her breath before the kid was on her lap, pulling up her shirt, and pressing his own navel against hers. "Punky, punky!" he squealed with delight, and I just sighed in relief.

*

The whole world joined hands and, in the person of my family doctor, provided me with a surgeon as bright as the sun, a sight for sore eyes. After all, they were going to operate on my middle finger. When I arrived at the hospital, the doctor greeted me with a smile and said: "Take off your cap and everything else as well, we will start soon." Take everything off, right. And leave all hope outside.

Mighty, big and noble, looking like the folk singer Zanda Štrausa, the nurse dressed me in a short patient's gown, white with pink flowers, and pushed me in a wheelchair to the operating room. It's only my middle finger, I can walk just fine, but they stuck me in the chair anyway. Its left paw was broken off, I put my foot on the right one, lifted one leg over the other and rode like a noble lord, bare thighs crossed at an angle, sitting elegantly and entertaining the fake Zanda with funny stories. If it had been the real Zanda, we would have sung a duet of "I Don't Like You Very Much", as we used to

at the Liepāja dorm, but you can't have everything. The real Zanda had other things to do, weddings to manage, playing a Snow White for some gangsters, acting in the local "Fire" series, and taking part in folk festivals, she couldn't suddenly throw everything aside and cross half the country to drive Bargais through the hospital corridors.

The journey ended at a green table in the middle of a huge hall. I climbed up, leaned back, stretched and tucked the little robe inconspicuously around my things – which, for some reason, always shrink in these situations – so I lay there and was ready. They covered me with an anti-radiation blanket and started to give me an anesthetic. Local anesthesia, it turned out. "Local?" "Local!" So no chance of flying with the reindeer as I had hoped. But you can't wish for everything. So I lay there and made do. I felt my middle finger turn to stone little by little, and my curiosity was aroused. It was interesting. Like for Vaida Salcēviča in the "Life" program, when she just kept repeating this one word. Interesting! Interesting! She would interview a gardener who would go on and on about gladioli, but the viewer soon loses any interest in the flowers, he is waiting for him to finally shut up and for Vaida to say "interesting" again. Interesting. So now I have two doctors, the cool one and a bald macho who looks like Woody Harrelson, and they drill and sew, and crimp, and wire my finger for a whole hour. I floated like a hedgehog on my table, just going with the flow, nothing depended on me, just interesting. A sheet was hung to block my view of the finger, all I could see was the X-ray monitor showing the bones. What do I know about bones? Nothing at all! Bones like any other bones, my native bones. The doctor says to me: "Bend it, straighten it, bend it, straighten it!" But I don't feel anything there! How can I bend and straighten the emptiness? So I bend and straighten in my mind. "So? Is something happening there?" "It is, it is!" Ah, well so, thoughts really do have great power, so just keep lying there peacefully. Although – not really peaceful. In rapture! That someone as bright and as beautiful as the sun would find my middle finger so important. An insignificant "fuck you" sign, nine times two, but the sound that came from behind the screen was as if a bull's belly had been ripped open and the whole creative crew is busy up to their elbows in it. When the drill went off, there was no more bull, no more hedgehog: it was a piece of rock from which David was about to emerge, only the rock didn't feel anything.

He takes my hand in his, holds it and puts it down, takes it and holds it, and puts it down again, and I no longer need the general anesthetic – I love this man. "I love you!" my hand cries as loudly as a dumb hand can cry. I love you without any external manifestation. It wouldn't be the same if there were manifestations. That's what our strange love is all about. A moment later, he will leave the room, I will get down from the green table, and our romance will be over.

They left me in the hospital overnight because the wound was to be treated the next morning. Just before midnight, the fake Zanda rolled her little mobile bar into the room. Applause, applause! The midnight bar is the highlight of the day in some rooms, some guys practically live for it, especially when the company includes the shameless beauty, the funny old geezer, and the alternative wise guy. All three lie there in a row exchanging family jokes, but all midnight Zandas have bushy fur and belong to the winged species. "Who needs a Tramadol? Who needs what? The big shot or the small shot?" she asks, flapping the furry do over her shoulders, and our faces are touched by a light breeze complete with an insubstantial dose of ceiling lime. What a question! Tramadol, of course, the big one, bigger, the biggest!

After the jab, I went limp and sweaty, and returned to the past, to the yellow plum orchards of Slampe and stayed awake all night, enjoying the buoying high again after a thirty-year break. In this exclusive situation I had to think some exclusive thoughts. But nothing came to mind, I just felt warm and good, and there was this light romantic feeling about my beautiful doctor. Finally, when it was almost morning, I had a thought: my identity is the dot on "i" in the word "identity". On the first "i", that is. One "i" is enough for me, I thought, someone else can take the other one, including the dot. And they can take the other letters as well. I posted this epiphany on Facebook and fell asleep for a few hours on the last of my Tramadol.

It all started with Smallville. I had made it to the part where young Clark Kent is at school and has a family science class and a documentary about making babies. Watching this, Superman got a hard-on for the first time in his life, set the screen on fire with his gaze, and almost burned down the entire Smallville school. I, on the other hand, had a craving for a cigarette. I

got up from the couch, and pressed my middle finger so deep into the black matter of the couch that the end got bent, there was a snap, and the finger stayed bent. Great. Just a split second and you get that. No pain even. A month followed, full of vain hopes that my body would heal itself, there was gradual swelling and finally this surgery, with a real documentary, lasting five hours, in Latvia's only trauma hospital.

You know, documentaries are different. In some of them, the actors take off their clothes and touch each other in different places, and these places are beautiful and big, and in that sense everything is fine, except that there is no blue sky on their faces, and if there is, then there is no sun shining in it. And the day is cloudy, and the movie is ruined. But sometimes, very, very, very rarely, the actors just lie down next to each other and just lie there and talk, without even taking their clothes off. They are also muscular, like everyone else, but they have happy eyes and friendly looks, and they talk like friends. After they talk, of course, they take off their clothes and get down to business – these are documentaries after all – but they get down to the business like equal partners, there's no Star Wars, there's no Mars and Venus – they just float down the river like little siblings, away to the edge of the world, to the very end of the rainbow, away from this reality that maybe doesn't deserve them at all.

So I waited from three to eight. Just sitting there. I know how to sit. All this spring, that's all I've been doing, sitting all night. It's not hard, it's what you do. It's an occupation. Just sit and keep sitting to the best of your ability, to the best of your form. Look straight ahead. Life is going on all around you, an emergency room life. Everyone has something broken – an arm, a leg, sometimes just a finger. When I went in, the little bespectacled receptionist girlie said: "Do you really want to wait? It will be a very long wait, a very long line, at least five hours." "But maybe it will go faster?" I said. "My dog is locked up in the house." "No, it'll take five. One person takes fifteen minutes, another forty-five, and then the ambulance might bring someone in. So that's a fair estimate. Maybe you should come tomorrow, in the morning." But I can't do it in the morning, I have to sleep in the morning. It takes a lot out of me to even leave the house, I have to prepare for three hours, so "in the morning" is definitely out.

I was assigned number 26, so I squeezed into the only available seat and started to sit. There was someone on the left, and on the right there was some butcher from the market, a scruffy, yellow sponge on her forehead like Nastassja Kinski in the movie "Tess", and she had a urine-colored overall with a brown drop of blood on her chest. The "All is vanity" badge. She must have slipped on a fat tendon on her way to get another carcass. I looked around – poor kids. You'll be my slave, you have no choice, but first come, first served. Whichever doctor is free, that's the one you'll get. If it's a poisoner, you go to a poisoner. Two junkies in wheelchairs – one in a red tracksuit all skin and bones, the other one in a black tracksuit all beefy, hair the black of the tracksuit, his shifty mommy next to him. In the opposite corner, two Russian women, princesses of some apartment block, one has something wrong with her ankle, the other is there to hold her hand. Sexy adventures. The victim's fingernails are long and green, like an Aramis perfume box, and she is texting something on her iPhone. The other one woke up in the morning to the sound of warf outside the window, but it turned out to be just rain on the windowsill, in the same world where her friend has a broken ankle. An hour later, the victim's boyfriend arrives, two hours later, the boyfriend's friend, and then it's half the neighborhood and assorted relatives. In another corner, there's a woman in pants, all ethnic brown, with a small oval face, a thin, red crew cut. Just like my friend Usne, only 30 years older and tormented by the passage of time, one arm tied to her side. And then there's another poor creature. Really – the upper lip hanging over the trembling lower lip, the rest of the body all limp, the poor trembling lower lip bearing all the considerable weight. Midsummer festivities written all over the face. Perhaps her husband gave her a sound beating in the ferns or she simply fell, the complexion has telltale signs of a hangover, Life is a vale of tears. Other seats are taken by less colorful specimens that remain in memory like little stains. Plop, plop, plop, plop, cakes, or rather, what is left of them when the happy celebrants of life have fallen head first into them.

I take the light blue New Testament out of my bag, I read two chapters from the Gospel of John about the woman from Samaria and "take up your bed and walk". I go out for a cigarette and open Facebook on my phone to send out a cry for help – maybe someone will come and bring roses. No takers, just some joking replies from girls expressing their condolences. What can you do, they probably don't understand and think it's real roses.

One says that maybe I have swan's neck in my middle finger. I try to chat, but the battery is also on its last legs, it dies in the middle of a sentence. The reception girlie turns out to have a charger, so I leave the phone with her, I'll continue chatting in an hour.

I am called in for an x-ray where the finger is photographed this way and that. Back in the waiting room, I see that my seat is already taken. I sit down on the opposite side, between the Russian chicks and the old Usne. I sit. I sit and sit. Legs crossed, legs spread. Which looks better – spread or crossed? Who the hell knows. I sit. I could listen to what the chicks are saying. There are these creatures with blue-green strands in their hair who like to join in on the conversation at the next in restaurants and then go on social networking sites to discuss who said what terrible things about women. I too could try. But I can't: my mind tries to listen, but the ears refuse. Som kind of a verbal jumble that doesn't cohere into meaningful sentences. I have no strength for the New Testament. The addict in the black tracksuit has moved from the wheelchair to the chair, keeps lifting his cast elbow up and down, then suddenly jumps to his feet and flies across the room right at me. The Russian chicks have limped out for a smoke, he plops down where they used to sit and blows out like a walrus that has spent half a night rummaging on the bottom of the sea and now has finally surfaced to lay his wet flapper on a blackened rock on the shore. I feel my hair stand on end because he looks like a terrorist. For some reason I turn to Usne and say: "I'm going for a smoke too!" and I dart out of the building. I smoke on the porch and wait. Will it explode? Will it not? Too bad for poor Usne, but at least I'm safe, I'll survive along with the Russian chicks. I can already see tomorrow's headlines in my mind's eye "Terrorist Attack on Trauma Hospital! Terrorist Blows Up Latvia's Last Emergency Trauma Center!" But no bombing, of course, because who's gonna blow themselves up with their mother by their side? On the way, I take a look in the mirror. I look OK. Slim, beard trimmed, just a little on the pale side. But no one pays any attention to me. Oh well. A good thing, actually.

A broad comes in, one of the educated ones, close to both heaven and, just to be on the safe side, close to earth. Black jeans, black jacket, face all square, hair white, must be the editor-in-chief of some glossy women's magazine, all soaked in expensive embryo creams on the outside, but probably even poetry

in her soul. She sits down and starts tapping away on her cell phone, must be something terribly progressive and socially critical. Another one, a family woman, judging by the anthropological type, an old "Jumprava" fan. She is dressed in a bright baggy skirt, red imitation leather, hoopoe-like crest on her head, and she walks up to the counter – the kind of walk that makes you think someone is pinching her ass cheeks. No one is, but she still kind of bounces along anyway. On respect. No, on reflex. They say to her: "Go over there." And she says: "I understand!" The traumatized one is her little boy, twice the size of his mother. Broken under his own weight. Which limb exactly, is not clear, a total x-ray needs to be done, because all the limbs are covered in fat, only two small hands protrude, and he stuffs them into the pockets of his grey hoodie and flops down in the only empty chair. His ass cheeks bulge through the ribs of the chair, touching the ass sitting on the right as well as the one sitting on the left. The editor next to him shrinks into herself. Horizontally, so to speak. Vertically, she stretches out like a mast, her eyes popping out at the top and taking refuge in the virtual world – refusing to be a part of this one. I do nothing. I just sit and watch.

Luīze Gulbe



Young artist and writer Luīze Gulbe (born 2000) graduated from the Graphic Arts Department at the Latvian Academy of Art in 2025. As well as working in graphic art, she also creates books, illustrations, environmental objects, and paintings. Gulbe's first book, *Lille meklē Laimi* (Lille Seeks Happiness), for which she wrote the text and created the illustrations, was nominated for the long list of the Latvian Literature Award 2024 in the 'Most Promising Debut in Literature' category. Gulbe is also the illustrator of the book *Leļļu dziesmas – dziedamas un lasāmas* (Puppet Songs – to Sing and Read), written by puppet theatre director, playwright and songwriter Valdis Pavlovskis and published by Aminori in 2024.

In her creative work, Gulbe explores themes related to emotional intelligence, the 'dark' or unknown part of the human subconscious, and internal conflicts that, while unpleasant, are also very instructive. Through her work, she seeks to cultivate understanding, acceptance and love for oneself and others. She works with children in creative plasticine workshops, helping to stimulate their imagination and emotional engagement.



Her book, *Lille meklē Laimi* is an exciting story that keeps readers waiting for the next chapter as they experience the adventures of the characters. It is based on the journey of the main character, Lille, who resolves internal emotional conflicts arising from the loss of a close friend. Throughout her journey, Lille experiences a range of emotions, including sadness, anger, and fear, which surface when she encounters unfamiliar and challenging situations. By acknowledging these negative feelings, Lille learns to accept them and overcome her greatest challenge — herself.

Accompanying Lille enables young readers to view their own emotions from a different perspective. Fear, sadness, and anger are not bad or shameful things, but part of an unpleasant yet valuable inner journey in which we discover ourselves and learn about the many wonderful aspects of life around us!

This book will be a valuable read for families to enjoy together.

Fiction for children aged 6 and over
20,5 x 25,5 cm, 80 pages



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Eiropas Savienība



Kultūras ministrija

Ciemiņa dāvana

Levads

Tiesi pirms saullēkta kāda radība izlidoja no tumsas un traucās pretim ritaušmai. Tas nebija putns, lai arī tam bija asi spārni. Tā nebija arī lidojoša zivs, lai arī tās ķermenī izraibināja sārti zeltainas zvīņas. Radība traucās pāri ezeram tik klusi, ka ne viltņitis uz ūdens virsmas to nenodeva.

Ezera vidū bija viena gluži balta sala un tikpat balta mājiņa uz tās. Namiņi ieskāva pukes, krūmi un vareni koki. Vienu no šiem kokiem lidonis izvēlējās par savu atpūtas vietu. Radība nolaidās uz zara tik maigi, ka ne lapiņa nenodrebēja. Tumsa, lēnā garā atkāpdamas, atklāja skatnīnām mājiņu, no tās uz ezeru veda balta koka laipa. Vēl pirms saule bija uzlēkusi, radība atkal pacēlās spārnos un turpināja ceļu pāri ezeram.

Saule celās arvien augstāk un izgaismoja koka lapas – tagad aiz tām vareja manīt kaut ko neparastu.

Uz zara, kur tikko bija sēdējis nezināmais ciemiņš, gulēja baltmelnī svītrotā ola. Pa dienu ota sildīja sauli. Nakts koka lapas saklāvas ciešāk, lai pasargātu to no aukstuma. Pēc dažām nedēļām ola pirmo reizi sakustējās.



5

Dīvas sirdis

8. nodaļa, kura Lille uzzina, kā pareizi pretoties hīmozei, un saprot, ka izolējusi bistamu draugu, bet atpazīst tā sirdi savējā. Tikmēr Patiesības straume plūst skaļi un spēcīgi.

Tagad Lille patiešām bija pārbijusies. Viņa centās apvaldīt raudas, taču pārdzīvojumus bija pārāk liels. Asaras līja par visu – sāpēm, šausmām un briesmām, neziņu, kas notiks tālāk, un neizpratni, ko nu iesākt. Ausainīte atkal jutās ļoti vientuļa. Vai šis ir beigas? Lilles skumjas un izmisums izskanēja un atbalsojās miltzāģa teļā.

– Es tevi gaidīju, Lille. – dobjā bals atskanēja no tumsā plašuma. Lille pazina šo balsi.

– Ko tu no manis grib? – viņa centās slēpt izibuli.

– Tu nekur nenodēpēsies. Es jūtu tavas bailes – atbildēja balss. Cita pēc citas plāsa koka iedegās lapas pie alas stienim. Lilles acis apzīlība no tik pēkšņās spozmes. Kad skatiens aprada ar gaismu, tam atklājās Ķeniņš visā savā vareņībā. Lille noelsās. Kopš viņu pēdējās tikšanās reizes milzu radījums bija izaudzis desmitkārt lielāks. Ausainīte sāka drebēt visā augumā, sirds krūtīs neganti sitās.

– Jā, jā! Baidies no manis! – Ķeniņš ierēcās un paaugās vēl vismaz par plaukstu tiesu.



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– Oooo. – Lille izdvesa un ieinteresēta pieskārs olai vēlreiz. Tā gozējās tieši saules staros.

– Jāņem un jāpārkauda Laimim, viņš gan jau zinās, no kurienes tā te gadījies. – Lille norāpis no koka un devās uz māju.

– Nekad nesmu tādu redzējis. – Laimis smaidot turēja oļu plaukstā. Pēkšņi ola sakustējās. Lille salēcās, un Laimis gandrīz nometā oļu zemē.

– Izkatās, ka tur kāds ir! – Laimis iesaucās. Lille pielika olai ausi, un viņas seja atplauka smaidis.

– Tur tiešām kāds ir!

Abi asi pagatavoja olai jaunu mājvietu, iekļājot kastē mīkstatu drāniņu. Tad gaidīja. Lille aizmirsā dārza darbus, Laimis aizmirsā pusdienu gatavošanu.

Ola kāds spirinājās un spārdījās. Vienam sparīgam spārienam drīz sekoja citi, pēc brīža olas caurmalā parādījās pirmā plaisa. Cauri tai izspraucās maza galviņa.

– Kaut ko tādu redzu pirmo reizi dzīvē! – abi draugi nodomāja.

Sika radība izrausās no caurmalas. Tas nebija putns, lai arī tam bija spārni. Tā nebija arī lidojoša zivs, lai arī tās ķermenī izraibināja sārti zeltainas zvīņas. Uz viņu spodrās, baltās salas tas bija kas pavisam jauns.

8



Sajutusi, ka joprojām guļ uz cietas un mitras zemes, ausainīte piecēlās kājās un piesardzīgi gāja pa tuvāko alas atzaru uz skaņas pusi. Pagāja labs brīdis, līdz ūdens čalas kļuva pavisam skaļās un vareja nomanīt vāru gaismas atblāzmi. Lille tuvojās tai un nonāca maza kambarī.

Avota izteka bija vien šaura plaisa alas sienā, taču tā straume – spēcīga. Ūdens mirzēja un izgaismoja teļu. Tas pūnoja balts un krīta tālu lejā, necaurredzamā tumsā. Vareja nojaukt, ka šaurais kambaris viņpus avotam beidzas ar klinšu malu. Lille atiepa roku, lai pieskartos ūdenim. Viņa bija izslāpusi un nogurusi. Vairāk par visu viņai gribējās atrast Laimi un beidzot doties mājās. Ausainīte domāja par zeltlācīti un pieskārs ūdenim. Nekas nenotika. Lille piecēlās tuvāk un padzēras no avota. Avota ūdens līja nerimīgi un skaļi, šaurajā teļā skana atbalsojās tik stipri, ka lika aizkrist Lilles ausim.

Lille padzēras vēlreiz, taču joprojām nekā nenotika.

– Kur ir Laimis? – viņa skaļi jautāja. Nevienš Lillei neatbildēja.

– Vai tad šeit nevar uzzināt patiesību?!

Lille stāvēja un gaidīja. Nekas nenotika. Ūdens plūda un gāzas lejup par klinšu malu tāpat kā iepriekš. Lille vērēja ūdens nemitīgo kustību un atzīmēja. Viņa tuvojās avotam, lai pieskartos tam vēlreiz, liecās pie ūdens, taču paslīdēja uz slāpās klinšu un krīta... Lille izslīdēja cauri ūdens sienai un atpazina vietu, kur viss bija balts. Apkārt valdīja pilnīgs klusums.

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Lille Seeks Happiness

by Luīze Gulbe

Translated by Ieva Lešinska

1. The Visitor's Present. Introduction

Right before sunrise, a creature emerged from the darkness and flew toward the dawn. Despite its fast wings, it wasn't a bird. Nor was it a flying fish, although its body shimmered with rose-gold scales. The creature glided over the lake so silently that not a single wave moved to betray its presence.

In the middle of the lake was a completely white island with a white house on it. The small house was surrounded by flowers, bushes, and large trees. The winged visitor chose one of these trees on which to rest. It settled on a branch so gently that not a single leaf trembled. As darkness slowly faded, the little house and the white wooden footbridge leading to the lake came into view. Before the sun rose, the creature took flight and continued its journey across the lake. As the sun rose higher, it illuminated the leaves of the tree—there was something extraordinary about them now. On the branch where the visitor had been sitting was a black-and-white striped egg. During the day, the sun warmed the egg. At night, the tree's leaves folded gently around the egg, shielding it from the cold. Some weeks later, the egg moved for the first time.

2. Lille, Laimis, and Joy. In this chapter, life on the island is comfortable, yet King grows.

Lille, the little elf girl, picked up the bucket and followed the footbridge back to the garden. The bucket was full of water from the lake, causing her to sway slightly. She had been working hard all morning but didn't feel tired — she enjoyed gardening so much! She poured the water into

the watering can and went to water the beds. Everything in her garden was white: the flower petals, the leaves, the vegetables, the berries, the trees, and the bushes. Lille was always happy and in a good mood since she didn't live on the island alone. She had a friend: a golden bear named Laimis. While Lille gardened, Laimis cooked in the kitchen. Today's menu featured coastal aquatic plants and fresh vegetables from the garden. A sweet aroma wafted from the house.

“That was such a dark cloud,” Lille thought, remembering the strange sight from this morning as she picked up leaves by the lake. “So dark, it was nearly black!”

Lost in thought, she continued to water the white cabbage bed. The sun beat down on her, and she soon needed to rest in the shade.

“Maybe the cloud is still there. Let me take a look,” she thought, pulling herself up to a branch. She kept climbing higher and higher. When she reached for the thickest branch near the treetop, she touched something smooth and warm. She scrambled up and saw a black-and-white-striped egg surrounded by leaves.

“Wow,” Lille whispered, touching the egg again. It was basking right where the sun shone. “I should show it to Laimis. He'll know where it came from,” she thought as she climbed down and went to the house.

“I've never seen anything like that,” Laimis said, holding the egg and smiling. Suddenly, the egg moved. Lille jumped, and Laimis almost dropped it.

“It looks like there's someone in there!” Laimis exclaimed. Lille put her ear to the egg, and her face lit up.

“There really is someone in there!”

They quickly made a new home for the egg, placing it in a box lined with soft cloth. Then, they waited. Lille forgot about gardening, and Laimis forgot about making lunch.

Inside the egg, someone was wriggling and kicking. One vigorous kick followed another, and soon, the first crack appeared in the shell. A tiny head emerged from it.

“I’ve never seen anything like this in my life,” they both thought.

The little creature scrambled out of the shell. It wasn’t a bird, even though it had wings. Nor was it a flying fish, even though its body shimmered with rose-gold scales. On their bright, white island, it was unlike anything ever seen before.

Laimis and Lille had never crossed the lake to the other shore — the thought hadn’t even crossed their minds because island life was very comfortable. They did what they pleased every day and felt good about it. The sun always shined, and the vegetables and flowers grew well. They could exchange their garden produce for things they couldn’t grow or make themselves when the floating shop from the lakeshore village came by. Laimis and Lille never fought. Laimis was always joyful, and his joy spread to Lille, too. One could say that joy was the fertile island’s main resident.

The creature that hatched from the striped egg settled in quite fast. Lille and Laimis named it King. The bear spent his days as before, drawing, watching flowers grow, cooking meals, and enjoying everything that took place on the island. Lille and King gardened, fished, and sunbathed together. The little elf girl never lost sight of King, and she soon became so fond of him that she couldn’t imagine life before or after his arrival. It seemed as if they had become one while observing them. Although King couldn’t speak, he purred affectionately and rolled his eyes in a friendly manner. Lille didn’t find it hard to understand him without words—maybe through the power of thoughts or another mystical force. Laimis didn’t know this language, nor was he capable of learning it. He couldn’t translate King’s growls or read his mind. Slowly and imperceptibly, he was excluded from their friendly threesome.

The winged creature ate a lot. Soon, Lille gave him all the produce from her garden—King got every last bite. After receiving such care and attention, he grew bigger rapidly, and his shamelessness grew with him. Soon, he was larger than Lille and Laimis combined, but the house was too small for all three of them. One night, he grew so large that he couldn’t fit through the doorway. It became increasingly difficult for Lille to feed the creature. When he wasn’t full, he puffed and huffed angrily.

Laimis started to worry about Lille because she didn’t have time for the things that made her happy anymore; she only did what King ordered. Laimis tried to talk to Lille about it, but the elf girl wouldn’t listen to her old friend. Laimis, who used to radiate joy, became increasingly sad and pale. His golden fur gradually lost its shine.

He often sat by the lakeshore, reminiscing about the days when joy ruled the island. Now, King ruled.

3. Hunger Speaks in a Harsh Voice. In this chapter, Laimis is absent, and Lille’s new friend becomes wild, scary, and big. White hands save Lille.

Lille was worn out from endlessly serving her new friend, but she tried to ignore it. King’s bright eyes dazzled Lille, making her work faster and harder. However, the garden could not provide enough fruit, vegetables, and berries to satisfy King’s needs. He could sense this and became angry. Lille was no longer allowed to sleep or eat, let alone spend time with Laimis, who was growing paler and smaller by the day. He had become almost invisible.

One day, Lille gathered her courage and told King that she was tired and couldn’t feed him anymore.

“Don’t you care about me?” King growled in irritation.

“Of course I do. I’m trying so hard because of you. It’s just that—” Lille tried to explain. The unfair accusation came so suddenly that Lille didn’t even have time to be surprised. “What do you know? Her friend could talk—and loudly, too!

“Just what?”

“I don’t have the energy. I’d like to rest a bit.”

“But who will take care of me while you rest?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t think of that.”

“Exactly. You didn’t think of that. We’re having such a good time

together! You're so great at taking care of me." King grinned, baring his sharp teeth.

Lille noticed that King was getting angry. For the first time, she felt a cold shiver in her stomach. It was fear, but she didn't know what to call it.

"But King, I've done so much for you! Why are you behaving like this?"

"What do you mean? I have been good to you. Everything I've done has been for your own good. You just don't see it."

"Then why didn't Laimis treat me like that? He let me do what I wanted and rest when I was tired."

"And where is he now? Where is this Laimis who was so good to you?"

Lille ran out into the yard and looked around, but she couldn't see the golden bear anywhere. She hadn't noticed that Laimis had gradually become paler and quieter. She didn't know that his favorite spot was now at the end of the footbridge, or that he felt sad and alone.

"Well? Where is your dear Laimis now?" King growled from the house.

"I don't know. I can't remember the last time I saw him," Lille whispered to herself. The beast heard that, too.

"Well, there you go! Now you only have me. You must take care of me!"

King started to get to his feet.

"Come here, Lille!"

She flinched but didn't move.

"I told you to come here!" King said in a louder, more persistent voice.

He tossed around, stood up, broke through the roof of the house, growled, and flapped his wings. Then, he tried to grab Lille with his huge claws. She hid behind a tree and called for Laimis in fright. King's wings stirred up a strong wind that brought black clouds and rain. The beat of his wings blended with the roar of thunder and the sound of the rain. The air crackled with lightning. King flew higher and higher into the sky. The whirlwind destroyed Lille and Laimis's house, uprooting trees in the process. Lille blocked her ears and tried to call Laimis again. King growled and grew so

large that he covered the sun. Lille hid her face in her hands.

"Why aren't you looking at me anymore?" A deep voice resonated, filling Lille's entire body with fear.

"Why aren't you taking care of me anymore?" The voice roared right next to her ear.

She tried to hide under the last remaining tree, curling into a ball and covering her ears. She prayed for someone to come and save her.

Suddenly, a bright ray of light burst through the stormy clouds and shone on her face. The light grew, filling her with warmth and urging her to stand up. She straightened her shoulders and began to grow. As she grew closer to the sky, King's growling quieted, and then disappeared altogether. When the elf girl opened her eyes, she realized she was flying high above the island. The clouds gathered in front of her like the soft features of a large, gentle face. She felt big, gentle arms grasp her. When she looked straight into the light, everything went dark again.

Lille woke up under a tree. Everything around her was quiet. She scrambled to her feet and went to look for Laimis. She circled the island three times, called Laimis's name, and checked the ruins of the house and the plant beds that King had destroyed. She ran to the shore, climbed a tree, and yelled at the top of her lungs. Laimis was nowhere to be found. Lille collapsed on the white footbridge, tears spilling down her cheeks.

"What have I done? Where are you, Laimis? I forgot about you. I pushed you away. Now you're gone..."

"And you, King? Why? I took care of you! Why did you become so awful and mean?"

Lille looked at the sky and cursed King. Anger and tears filled her eyes. For the first time in her life, she felt betrayal, loss, and fear, and her heart ached from it all.

The island, once joyful and prosperous, now lay in ruins—silent and sorrowful.

4. The Heart Knows. In this chapter, Lille looks into the eyes of a fish, takes a boat ride, and arrives on the shore of a new life.

Tears rolled down her cheeks and fell into the lake. She stared at her reflection, and the reflection stared at her.

“I need to find Laimis,” she thought. “But where should I look?”

“Laimi-i-is!” She called out loud. “If you can hear me, please come back!”

The surface of the lake rippled, and the head of a fish emerged. Lille looked into its eyes, and the fish looked at her. It swam closer to the footbridge and slowly pulled itself out of the water. A rope, worn by time and covered in algae, hung around its neck. Lille walked to the edge of the footbridge, grabbed the slippery rope, and helped the fish move forward. As she did so, she noticed the rest of the creature’s body—long and lithe like a snake’s but with several pairs of arms. They both pulled the rope until an old boat surfaced. Exhausted, Lille sighed deeply, sat down on the footbridge, and the creature joined her.

“I know Laimis,” the half-fish, half-snake began. “He was very sad and often sat here. He needed a friend, and so did I.”

“I have to find Laimis! Do you know where he is? I’ve been such a bad friend!”

“Laimis said you were just lost but would be back soon. I suppose it’s a stage we all must go through.”

“I’ll be back? But I’ve been here the whole time!” Lille exclaimed.

“That’s only part of the truth. You were here, but part of you was elsewhere.”

“I don’t get it.”

“You will when the time comes,” the fish said, smiling at Lille.

“Do you know where Laimis is?”

“No, I don’t. But I can help you look for him.”

Suddenly, Lille felt a pain in her heart and put her hand to her chest.

“Oh, why does it feel so heavy?”

“Your heart is trying to tell you something,” the water creature replied.

“Like what?”

“Ask it! Close your eyes and ask.”

Lille did as she was told and asked. In the darkness behind her eyelids, she began to see colors merging with the sun-dappled surface of the lake. Then, they transformed into a grim, dark gray, misty place. She saw trees and creatures whose names she didn’t know. She opened her eyes and, after a moment of silence, said,

“I think I must cross the water.”

“I will take you,” the fish said, moving skillfully in front of the boat and helping Lille pull herself in. The boat swayed, and Lille slid back onto the bench.

“Ready?”

Lille was too scared to answer, so she nodded instead.

The fish and the boat sped up quickly. Lille glanced back at the island where she had lived her entire life. Tears welled up in her eyes as she looked at her destroyed home. She knew it would never feel like home again without her dear friend. She cried.

“I will find you!” She cast one last look at the island, then stared straight ahead. The fish pulled the boat forward so quickly that water splashed in her face. In front of her stretched an unfathomable blue expanse that made her heart fall deeper and deeper into her stomach.

“It will all work out, Lille! Your new life starts today! You will succeed!” The fish encouraged her. Lille hugged herself and believed it. Her heart returned to her chest and beat faster, but this time, it wasn’t from fear. It was urged on by hope.

They floated for a long time. Lille fell asleep and dreamed. It was a happy dream. She saw her white house and garden. But it had changed! The flowers, trees, and bushes weren’t white anymore. The garden was now full of magnificent flowers, colorful vegetables, and bright berry bushes.

She walked between the plant beds, looking at them in amazement. There was a thorny shrub with red berries, huge yellow pumpkins, and violet root vegetables. Lille had never seen such plants before. She smelled something pleasant and turned toward the house. Who was there? Was Laimis inside? She ran to the door, but just as her hand reached the doorknob, a familiar voice called out to her. She turned around and saw King. He looked just like he did before—so beautiful and cute. He asked her to come with him. She looked at the door and remembered Laimis. Then, she looked at King and couldn't decide which way to go.

Suddenly, Lille woke up when the front of the boat hit the shore. Looking over the edge, she couldn't believe her eyes. She had never seen such bright colors! The little elf girl looked at the green and pink plants growing on the shore, the yellow sand, and the green and blue thicket in the distance. Then she realized she was alone on the shore. Her companion, the water creature, was gone. She felt scared and lonely again, but then she remembered the fish's words and said to herself: "My new life begins today. I am here, and I will find Laimis!"

She climbed out of the boat and gazed at the vast blue expanse.

"Thank you!" she said to the fish and the lake. Then, she turned around and walked along the shore toward the sun. She didn't know where she was going. She trusted her heart, and it led her forward.

5. Intoxicating Berries. In this chapter, the soil is alive and can talk. Yet, Lille finds herself in the saddest place on Earth.

The sand on the shore had been replaced by rocks that soon scraped her feet raw. The sun was sinking lower and lower. Lille was tired and hungry. The white plants she knew didn't grow on the lake's shore. The strange green leaves and pink stems swinging in the wind seemed unfit for consumption. She decided to venture farther from the shore to find shelter and food.

The landscape gradually changed. The rocky ground became moist and green. She saw small trees and bushes here and there.

Lille was tired. As she walked, she didn't look far ahead and took reckless steps until she found herself with one foot in a large puddle. She sank knee-deep in the water and got stuck in the mud. It felt as if someone were pulling her deeper and deeper into the mud. Lille was truly scared. It took her a great deal of effort to pull her leg out.

Looking up, she saw a vast expanse of bright green dotted with countless puddles of dark water and bluish hills. Every few steps, she saw little bushes with red berries the size of her fist. Her mouth watered. Her hunger was greater than her fear, so she walked up to the closest bush. As she reached for a large berry, the hill next to the bush moved. Startled, Lille sprang back, but stumbled on another blue, moving hill. She fell onto her back in the wet grass, which gave way under her weight. She felt as though the soil itself were alive, shifting and writhing beneath her.

"What are you doing here?" One of the hills rose in front of her, revealing a startling brown face. The beast's back was covered in grass, and his arms were dirty and gray. Tears constantly flowed down the giant's face.

"W-w-who are you?" Lille stammered.

"To sink in among the berries and forget yourself..." Lille heard several voices coming from the other hills.

She slowly crawled backward until her back hit a bush. A big, red berry hung in front of her forehead. But the talkative hills did not sit still. They kept coming closer.

"Only one... You can eat one berry..." The voices turned into whispers and hisses. "Just one... Ha-ha-ha... Precisely..." The whispering blended with deep, quiet laughter.

The beasts stopped, but the one closest to Lille sat right next to her.

"We're in the swamp of bereavement. These are our berries."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to. I'm lost," Lille explained desperately. He looked at the hills as the beasts picked the red berries and put them in their dirty mouths. With each bite, the eaters grew increasingly sluggish, but their whimpering and whining grew louder.

“Just o-o-o-ne...” The whispers lingered in the air over the wet swamp.

“You must leave before you forget,” the first beast slowly pushed the words over its gray lips.

A blanket of fog and darkness slowly covered the swamp. In the setting sun’s rays, the red berries shone bright and moist. Lille’s mouth filled with saliva.

“Only one,” she whispered as she grabbed a berry.

“Only one,” the sad giant repeated. Lille gazed at the hill creatures. She studied the closest monster, and her heart felt heavy. Beneath its dreadful exterior was a sad, weak creature.

Lille took a bite of the red berry. Warmth filled her body. It was the sweetest, softest, most delicious berry she had ever tasted! She took another bite, then another, until her hands were empty. Lille licked her sweet lips and sank into a dreamy sleep. All unpleasant sensations disappeared, and the girl’s lips moved quietly.

“It was Laimis’s own fault. I couldn’t do anything. I couldn’t save him. He should have felt pity for me. I’m completely alone.”

Other voices joined Lille’s whispers. “Yes, come with us. We will pity you. You are so tired. Come sleep on the soft moss.”

Lille lay down and sank deeper into the damp grass. The hill monsters sat around her and cried, sharing their pain.

But the dreamy happiness soon left her. She opened her eyes and sat up. She was shaking from the cold and dampness. Red berries glowed in front of her, pulsating and beckoning her. She remembered the pleasant warmth and sweet taste of the berries. Her hand reached for another berry.

“Only one, remember that...” The sad creature in front of Lille said, looking at her with tears in its eyes.

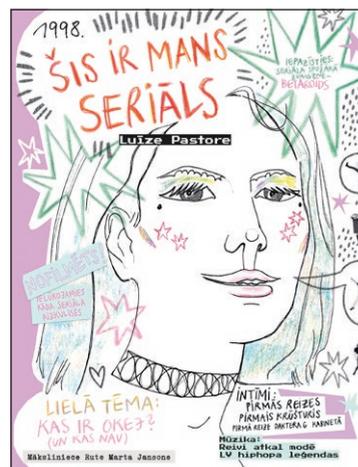
“But I’m so cold. Just one more,” Lille begged, tears appearing in her eyes. The sad creature didn’t try to stop her anymore. Lille picked another berry from the bush and ate it in a few bites. She warmed up again, and nothing seemed to matter anymore—not Laimis, not her old home, not even

this new world. She traveled from one bush to the next, eating as many sweet berries as she could. Then, she sank back into the moss and drifted into a dreamlike oblivion. The creatures of the hills continued eating the berries and sinking into the moss next to Lille, one after another. The swamp hissed, whimpered, and cried. Night draped its blanket over the swamp, slowly lulling Lille to sleep in the saddest place on Earth.

Luīze Pastore



Writer Luīze Pastore (born 1986) has established a solid position in Latvian children's literature. She began her successful career with *Maskačkas stāsts* (The Maskachka Story, 2014), which was adapted into the animated film *Jēkabs, Mimmi un runājošie suņi* (Jacob, Mimmi, and the Talking Dogs). The book's English translation, *Dog Town*, was included in the selection of the best children's books in the United Kingdom in 2018. In 2015, Pastore began her *Art Detectives* series, whose plots are based on Latvian art history. Seven books have been published in the series, with plots based on motifs from well-known works of art in Latvian art history. This series is a collaboration with the artist Elīna Brasliņa, and it has earned the author several literary awards. The book *Neredzamais cilvēks* (The Invisible Man, 2016) was included in the White Ravens selection. Pastore's book *Laires bērni* (Laime's Children) received the International Jānis Baltvilks Prize in Literature in 2022. She has also devoted herself thoughtfully and professionally to working with children in schools and libraries, creating special tasks and thematic meetings. Pastore's works have been translated into English, French, and Estonian.



Luīze Pastore's 2023 book *Šis ir mans seriāls* (This Is My Series) is aimed at a teenage audience and transports readers back to a somewhat forgotten past: the story is set in the second half of the 1990s. Latvia had recently regained its independence (in 1990–1991) and was undergoing a complicated transition from a Soviet planned economy to a market economy. This included the rapid introduction of glossy magazines, advertising, and television series into everyday life.

The book's main character, thirteen-year-old Beta, is reluctant to audition for a role in an upcoming teen series. However, her mother thinks it is a great opportunity. Surprisingly, Beta is chosen, and the book chronicles her year of preparation for her big moment of stardom on television screens.

This Is My Series is a partly true, partly fictional story about society in the late 1990s, when awareness of ethical boundaries was just beginning to develop. It was a time when no one really knew what television content was appropriate for children and teenagers, or what kind of relationships were acceptable between a director and an underage actor. It was a time when anything went. Projects were 'pushed through' by any means, with everyone trying to survive and get by as best they could. This is also the case with the series *Supertīnis* (The Super Teen), in which Beta lives out her coming-of-age story.

The book's design and illustrations, by Rute Marta Jansone, are more reminiscent of a magazine, featuring many objects, idols, and press materials characteristic of the 1990s. Jansone received the International Jānis Baltvilks Award for her debut in children's literature in 2024.

Autofiction, teenagers 13+
Size 20 x 26 cm, 112 pages



Līdzfinansē
Eiropas Savienība



Kultūras ministrija

This is my series by Luīze Pastore

Translated by Žanete Vēvere Pasqualini

The First Time in the World

‘And now we’re going to do a scene with Betta and Tom. Imagine you’ve just resolved your issues -maybe there was some sort of misunderstanding and now you’ve made up. Let’s make it a silent scene where you just kiss. Alright?’ the director instructed.

Suddenly, I felt an urgent need to use the loo. But that would have been a bit too obvious a way to escape.

‘I have a feeling my character would be more the type to settle for a hug,’ I murmured.

The director looked up from his stack of screenplay pages, smoothed his hair and adjusted the collar of his leather jacket.

‘Are you the director of this series?’ he asked.

‘No.’

‘Did you write this series?’

‘No,’ I squeaked.

‘Well then,’ he concluded, rather coldly. ‘Remember what we said – you and your character are not one and the same thing. Camera rolling! Action!’

Tom’s face moved closer to mine and I immediately forgot how to breathe. Everything became painfully clear: I was about to make an utter fool of myself, die of embarrassment, and then, thoroughly dead, go and bury myself in the nearby graveyard.

I must have looked truly terrified - so much so that Tom halted halfway, ruffled his divine tuft of hair (which smelled like a strange blend of yeasty

dough and machine oil), shoved his hands into his rapper-style jeans and slowly stepped out of the carefully staged shot.

He walked over to the director and I heard what he said. Whether it was with sympathy, delicacy or I don’t know quite what, he said quietly:

‘Man ... I don’t think she’s ever kissed anyone before.’

Here we go.

Man, I’m fourteen - no, wait, thirteen ... Damn, how old am I? Doesn’t matter. And maybe I don’t even want to just *go in for a kiss* in front of the entire country!

Damn, damn, damn.

How did I end up here?

How did it come to this – my first kiss on demand, because someone *asked* for it?

The Fateful Ad

Morning. Exterior.

School holidays. A girl stands beside a mailbox, a country house in the background.

That girl is me - Betta. Yesterday, I finally turned thirteen. Not that I’ll be able to tell anyone - most of my classmates think I was thirteen last year. Yes, I lie about my age. I’m not afraid to admit it. But honestly, it doesn’t even matter. Even if I said I was fourteen now, I’d still be the youngest in the class. Besides, half of them still haven’t worked out when to take me seriously and when I’m just messing with them.

So Betta - twelve or thirteen or maybe even fourteen. An unidentifiable age, really, since she (that is, *me*) still doesn’t have breasts. I keep wondering if I could somehow make a deal for that to change this year. But since my family doesn’t believe in God, I have no idea *who* I am supposed to pray to. And what if I choose the wrong one and end up with *car bumpers* instead of boobs?

My best friend Ieva never laughs at these kinds of jokes. She sees right through them. She always tells me to stop worrying about it - that it really doesn't matter. Easy for her to say. She's turning fifteen this year and everything's going just fine with *her* puberty. All peachy and smooth sailing

So, the girl stands next to the mailbox. The snow is grey, it's cold and nothing is going on in her whole damn world - no news from her pen pals either.

It's easier to write letters than to talk. No one sees my face - except that one time I had to send my best photo. When I write, I can be my real twelve - now already thirteen - years old. I can be my true self. But I can also be anything I want. My jokes even come out funnier. And there's no way to hear whether someone laughs or not on the other end. In a letter, I could even tell someone I was in love with them. I haven't done that, of course. You don't lie about something like that. Maybe some of the other girls really do fall for those awful boys our age. But Ieva and I - we don't understand love. If falling in love means acting like complete goofballs - then no thanks.

The mailbox. The key creaks as it opens. No birthday wishes from Anna in Aizkraukle or Kārlis in Liepāja, nothing even from Madara in nearby Sigulda. But my favourite magazine, *Teen*, has arrived. It's meant for teenagers - thirteen to sixteen-year-olds - meaning it's now totally legitimate for me to read it.

The Same Morning. Interior.

The door clicks shut. I toss my jacket aside, slide off my boots and flop onto the living room sofa.

'Let's have a look at that!'

It's school holidays and Mum has had far too much rest from being a teacher and now she's started taking a dangerously keen interest in my sister's and my lives.

'I'm just interested in what you're reading,' she says. And when I reluctantly hand her the magazine, she immediately starts commenting on every single article.

I felt like she might as well have been poking her nose in my diary. What right did she have to criticize the beauty tips that, to her mind, I would no doubt be trying out? Of course, I could never admit that to her. We have been taught to rise above all that. It wasn't good to focus too much on your appearance, but at the same time, you couldn't completely ignore it. And in general, girls weren't supposed to make anything of themselves in front of boys who are still wet behind the ears. Even so, we were still expected to have a bit of zing.

'A mask of grated carrots to brighten tired winter skin,' Mum reads aloud. 'Raimond, did you hear that?' she calls to Dad, who's trying to sneak away down the hallway. After his shift as the odd-job man at the sawmill, Mum keeps him on a tight rein, afraid that he'll be off down the shop to spend all his money on booze. 'We can't even grow enough in the garden to put on the table, let alone for a face mask!' she laughs, nudging Dad back to his spot by the TV.

I probably look a bit sullen because Mum suddenly goes stiff. Even her voice sharpens, like when she's standing in front of her class.

'No, there's also some good stuff in there!' Mum says. 'Your generation is so lucky, being able to talk about these things so openly. You know what's what. You call things by their proper names.' My sister Kate takes a bite of her apple, smirking. 'What things, exactly?'

Mum pretends to be absorbed in the magazine. 'Katrīna!' she suddenly exclaims.

"Jesus! Mum, chill out!" Kate grumbles.

Mum starts reading out loud:

'Do you like the series *Saved by the Bell*? Have you always wanted to be a TV star? Are you aged 14-18? Then we are looking for someone JUST LIKE YOU! We'll expect you on Saturday, January 3, 1998, at the Riga Schoolchildren's Palace! We're casting for a new Latvian teen series, *Super Teen*.'

'So what?' my sister shrugs, completely indifferent.

'That is *not* "so what,"' Mum replies. "This is *amazing*! Go and work out what you're going to wear.'

'Wear *where*?'

‘To Riga tomorrow! We can’t let an opportunity like this pass us by,’ Mum explains.

‘Mum, hello?! Have you ever *seen* a series? They’re obviously looking for standard chicks - total Barbies,’ Kate protests. ‘Have you even noticed the sort of clothes I’m into?’

‘I notice every day, my dear,’ Mum says calmly. Kate opens her mouth in outrage, but Mum’s voice sharpens again. ‘What I mean is that it’s important to look original! Your unusual ... and, let’s say, *bright* fashion choices will be your strong point. Just maybe ... a bit less makeup? Let your natural beauty shine through?’

‘You really don’t have a clue,’ my sister snaps. ‘I’m completely wrong for them - I’m not photogenic. My face is asymmetrical.’

‘Asy –’ Mum’s eyes widen, but she swallows whatever she was about to say.

I’d never thought of Kate as having an asymmetrical face. She looks perfectly fine in photos.

‘Well then ... let’s not show your photos. No, I know - let’s just say we haven’t got a decent camera.’

I squint at my sister. It’s about to happen...

‘Mum, are you even listening to me, or is something wrong with you?!’

As I’d predicted, Kate starts shouting. ‘I don’t want to star in anything! I hate performing and you know it!’

My sister is a bit like a landmine - step in the wrong spot, and she explodes.

‘No, seriously. You and your drama club can go to hell!’

That’s when Mum starts to get a little cross - she really loved her amateur dramatics group back in the day. She even made it to the final audition for Baiba in the film *Blow, the Wind, Blow!*, which I haven’t seen. But never mind, she wasn’t actually in it in the end, although that’s not really the point. Not that it mattered.

What did matter was that Kate suddenly said:

‘I can’t wait to finally turn eighteen so you won’t be able to make me do

anything anymore. But look -you’ve got Betta! She’s right there ... it was your birthday yesterday, how old are you now?’

‘Thir — Really? Fourteen,’ I say, and Kate doesn’t even have time to be surprised. She’s too focused on finishing her train of thought.

‘And Betta loves all that singing, acting and twiddling about on stage!’ Kate scoffs.

‘Betta loves everything,’ Mum adds.

‘What a dreadful child,’ I sigh. ‘Wandering through every club in the area and getting more and more educated by the day.’

Mum gives me a questioning look and I respond obediently, ‘I want to star in a film!’

‘But how are you going to pull that off?’ Mum asks, already sounding a bit desperate

I could have taken offence but I understood that what Mum really meant was that - unlike my sister, whose ever-changing looks were constant fuel for the local gossip mill - I just looked a bit too ordinary. It wasn’t so much that I wasn’t photogenic. In photos, my face was barely there at all. Straight, mousy blond hair, invisible eyelashes and eyebrows and something looking more like a small hillock in place of a nose.

Teen magazine once said that during puberty, the body starts growing in strange, unbalanced ways. While some boys might suddenly have arms as long as aliens, some girls, like Betta, might sprout a giant nose. How wonderful was that? Some girls went into puberty with enormous breasts and others with an almighty beak.

‘Kids from all over Latvia will go along to the casting. You’ll need a bit of zing,’ Mum says, clearly nervous. ‘Mum, can we please just retire the word ‘zing’?’ I beg.

But Kate looks relieved.

‘You need to chill! I’ll come up with something.’

Nighttime. Interior.

It's 00:47. I'm squatting on the floor in our room while Kate has been doing my hair for what feels like hours. I can't see what she's up to - she's working on the back of my head - but I can tell you it's unbelievably painful. And then there's her music. I'm being tortured by her *Promigee* or is it *Prodigy* cassette. It's awful. I would never, ever, listen to something like that by choice. My head is exploding. But I think I mentioned that.

Also, I have nothing to wear.

Morning. Interior.

It's a pale morning. I open my eyes and there's my sister, hovering over my face.

'What are you going to wear?' she asks.

'I don't know,' I grunt.

'What do you mean, you don't know?' Kate snaps. 'How can you not know what you're wearing to an event of national importance? You had the whole night to think about it! Get your act together, little sis!'

We open my cupboard. The situation isn't great. I already knew that. Kate declares it catastrophic. I say I'll just have to grab the judges' attention some other way and maybe the hairdo she's been sculpting all night will be my saving grace.

Now I had a million *cosmic knots* in my hair. Kate had named them that. But around two in the morning, she screamed, 'What crappy hairdo is this?' Yet, come morning, she presented it to Mum like it was some kind of masterpiece. Only that famous singer whose name I can't remember and frankly, I've never even seen, has something like this on her head. Kate asked if I'd ever even watched TV or how else could I be so backward?

Cosmic knots. I quite like the sound of it. But I really hate how it looks. I have a little cry about it in the morning - just enough to get it out of my system but not so much that Mum will cancel our trip. And then, of course, I have a headache. Those few hours of sleep I managed

to get felt like lying on rocks. In the morning, five of the cosmic knots need to be redone.

In the end, we decide I should wear my only going-out orange pinafore, although we soon discover that it barely covers my bottom. Kate says it looks fine and makes me pair it with black jeans and a striped sailor t-shirt underneath. It is clear from the get-go that I am doomed to freeze to death. It's January! But Kate isn't bothered by that.

I don't have any decent shoes so my sister lends me her cool platform Keds - the ones with two white stripes. They are way too big so I have to walk carefully, trying not to trip and fall flat on my face in front of the judges. Mum, meanwhile, is ecstatic about my outfit, constantly saying she would have been beside herself with joy if she had had the chance to do something similar when she was my age.

I have my suspicions that Mum is more nervous about the whole thing than I am. It's like she thinks her whole life is about to change and all her problems will be solved because Betta will be famous.

Early afternoon. Interior.

In the corridor of the Schoolchildren's Palace, we all shake and quiver. Out of every five they call in, only one gets selected, if they're lucky. That's the moment when everyone prays to God, Zeus, Winnie the Pooh or some other fantastical figure, hoping that they will be the chosen one.

By the way, I think I must have a smear of dried toothpaste on my face. Everyone - absolutely everyone - is staring at me.

Ok, so it's not toothpaste. I checked in the mirror in the toilets. So the real reason must be that I look like a crocodile. I read somewhere that human embryos don't look like pears, pineapples or any other fruit when in the womb. They don't even look like humans. At first, they're just a little blob of meat - a meatball, basically. And the meatball even has a little tail. Then we're born. And somehow, I ended up being born as a crocodile. There's really no other explanation.

Later. Interior.

The casting session comes to an end. Jittery teenagers stampede up and down the corridor, waiting for the judges' decision - although the results are going to be announced in private, by phone. It smells of coconut deodorant and sweat. It all goes well. THE END.

Alright, alright - let's rewind. I failed. Spectacularly. With a big, echoing bang. The silly knots, the silly pinafore, the Keds and all the rest!

So this is how it went:

'Elisabetta Beidele!'

A woman calls my name, along with five others. In we go. They ask us our names and tell us to say something about ourselves.

'Well, you clearly all go to school and attend all kinds of extracurricular stuff. You're the golden youth of our nation,' says one of the judges, a man in a black leather bomber jacket. Honestly, I think it is the first time I've seen such a good-looking person up close. So the magazines aren't lying - handsome people *do* exist.

'But tell me something else,' he continues. 'Something people don't know about you. Or better yet, spill a secret - something you'd be too embarrassed to say out loud.'

What did he mean by that? Whenever someone asks me to say something about myself - maybe an adult or a pen pal - I always list my seven extracurricular activities, mention that I'm friendly and like reading. No one ever starts a conversation with, 'Hi, I'm Betta. I don't have boobs or pubes yet. Total embarrassment.' So, I waited to hear what the others would say.

One guy, Kristofers- already fourteen - said he'd been acting in theatre since he was a kid. 'Call me Chrissy,' he offers, all matey. 'And I've got a secret. I have a twin brother. Kutcher.' He flashed a grin.

'And?' says the man in the leather bomber, barely interested, with a shrug.

'He goes to school for me.'

'Alright,' Leather Jacket says, now a bit more intrigued.

'And what do *you* do in the meantime?' asks the other one - the guy in the

black transition sunglasses, like a chameleon.

'Well ... all kinds of fun things.'

'Like what, exactly?'

The guy in the black leather jacket smiles. The adults exchange glances and tick something on their papers.

'Not bad,' Leather Jacket murmurs. 'But next time, think through the details. You'll sound more convincing.'

Next up is a girl with eyes that are ... red. Not brown, not blue, not even green. Red. Psycho red. 'My name is Alise,' she says in a booming voice.

'What's going on with your eyes?' asked Chameleon Glasses.

'What?' Alise asks, rather thrown off balance. 'I was born like this.'

Leather Jacket cocks his head, smiling disbelievingly. Alise lets out a laugh so loud it echoes round the whole hall.

'Alright, alright. You want embarrassment? I'm embarrassed that I have such a boring face and plain grey eyes. I like to dress like a maniac and I'm not embarrassed in the slightest to strut down the street in clothes that make all the neighbourhood gossipers stop and stare.'

The judges tick their papers. Alise slips a pair of glasses out of her pocket and slides them onto her nose. Nailed it.

When my turn comes, I say my name is Elisabeth. But they can call me Betta. Or Elisa. Or even Elly, although no one has ever actually called me that.

I take a deep breath, gather myself and say, 'But you should call me Betta, because I like to speak in *bettaphors*.'

'Metaphors,' Chameleon Glasses corrects.

'Other people speak in metaphors. Betta speaks in *bettaphors*,' I reply. Not a single twitch of a smile.

Then I add, 'My favourite illness is diabetes. Because I like sugar.'

Absolutely nothing.

Then I say I am fourteen years old. Why did I lie again? I start rambling

that I began school at five. Why? I don't even know. But it turns out I'm a *prodigy*, since I'm already in eighth grade and getting nines and tens. Help, this perfectionism is giving off sleeping gas!

Long story short, I go completely bonkers, getting so nervous that I can't stop myself from overthinking, over-Bettanalysing things. But there and then, I can't think of anything else to say. I feel tears welling. I give up.

'Actually, there's absolutely nothing interesting about me.'

At that, the judges started laughing out loud for the first time.

'Yes, yes, - that's exactly what you're giving off: here stands a perfectly ordinary teenager,' Leather Jacket says, giving me a coy smile.

'Fine, let's move it along,' he coughs.

The judges don't make any ticks.

I've obviously made a complete fool of myself. Everything else we are asked to do passes in a blur, lost in a fog of embarrassment.

Leather Jacket then announces that one of the girls should stretch out on the floor, while the very animated Chrissy flails his arms around, speaking expressively and raising his eyebrows. I am so hot I can hardly breathe and, at one point, it looks like the girl lying down is so nervous she might faint.

'You haven't passed out, have you?' I ask quietly, poking the girl lying on the floor with my platform Ked. The judges laugh again.

'Stop! Thank you,' they say, gathering up their papers.

'Goodbye.'

Mum is all over me the second I step out.

'How did it go?'

'Fine,' I lie, of course. Jesus, what else am I supposed to say?'

'What did you have to do?'

'Not a lot, really,' I reply in all honesty.

'Oh no,' Mum sulks, and I can tell by her face that she has figured it out. I've messed up.

And then suddenly:

'You look cool!' Kristofers, or Chrissy, Mister Twin, stops next to me along with a very young, well-groomed woman. Mum quickly plasters on her standard smile, smoothing her hair nervously.

'Okay,' I mutter, unsure if he is serious or making fun of my clownish appearance. 'You too, very cool, super cool,' I say, playing it safe.

'Of course, it's a pity that the others from our five won't get through,' he says, staring straight into my eyes.

'Oh, never mind. It'll all be peachy,' I reply.

'No,' he says firmly, my attempt at being upbeat clearly transparent.

'I'm really not that bothered,' I chime.

Kristofers gives me a really fake smile and leaves.

'Well, what did you do in there?' Mum asks, fussing over her well-scrunched hair, her desperation clear.

'Nothing! I told you already!'

'ELISABETTA! WE TRY SO HARD!'

'Damn, Mum, what did you say this morning? That it doesn't matter if I don't get through! Honestly, to me it is totally, utterly all the same if I get in or don't. No one in there had any sense of humour! Good-looking people never do, have you noticed that?'

And then it all kicks off ... What about my future and blah blah blah.

I'm sick of listening to her. Now I sit in my mum's Volkswagen, neither listening nor speaking. The heater has stopped working again. I am freezing cold and starving hungry but I won't ask Mum for food. I won't ask for anything ever again! The car ceiling light flickers on and off. I want to destroy these damn cosmic holes!!! Bloody nonsense.

THE END.

Lote Vilma Vītiņa



Lote Vilma Vītiņa (pseudonym: Lote Vilma; born 1993) is a poet and illustrator. She enjoys working with both text and drawings, which is why she sometimes creates comics. Her drawings are characterised by lively, emotional lines that interact with pastel tones. They are light, spontaneous and expressive, depicting emotionally moving images. She is the author of the text and illustrations for the children's picture book *Dzejnieks un smarža* (Poet and Scent) (2019), which won the Latvian book art award Zelta ābele 2019 in the children's poetry category, as well as the Jānis Baltvilks Award 2020 for the best illustrations in children's and youth literature. In 2019, the artist's comic *Worms, Clouds, Everything* was selected by the dPICTUS platform jury for the 100 Outstanding Picturebooks exhibition at the Frankfurt Book Fair. Her works were also exhibited at the 2018 London Book Fair. In 2020, Lote's debut poetry collection *Meitene* (Girl) was published, followed by a collection of prose poetry for young people, *Ūdenstornis* (Water Tower), in 2021, and a poetry collection, *Puķainā istaba* (The Flowery Room), in 2025.



Lote Vilma Vītiņa's illustrated children's book *Dzejnieks un smarža* (Poet and Scent) encourages young readers to pay more attention to the scents they perceive.

One fine day, a poem enters the little Poet's nose. No, it's a cloud! Or is it rain? Either way, the Poet discovers a rich and diverse world of scents at that moment, which inspires him to write poetry and share his discoveries. Hidden between the pages is a task for young readers – can they find the fragrant strawberry?

This book has been translated into German, Spanish, and Armenian.

Fiction for children aged 5 and over
Size 28 x 19,5cm, 32 pages

The Poet and the Scents by Lote Vilma

Translated by Jayde Will

It was a cloudy day,
And the little poet had no inspiration.
The window suddenly opened
And a blue cloud came into the room
And went right up his nose!
It was the scent of summer rain.
The excited poet followed the scent,
Until he came to the city park.

The park was filled with blue clouds.
The moved poet wrote a poem:

My socks are wet,
My nose is soaked,
While earthworms appear
And start to dance.

The little poet wrote about a girl lost in thought that was going by:
Her hair smells
Like orange peels
Full of mystery
And warmth.

He wrote about the loud and busy city:
Smoke, smoke, smoke.
The drains have bad breath,
Animal doody, and juicy kebabs,
People's sweat and woman with grocery bags.

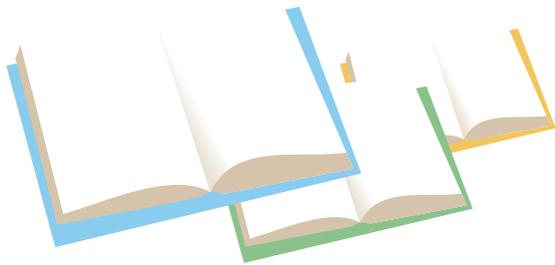
He wrote about the blossoms and a hot July evening:
The flower's heads
Move slowly
And make many
Wonderful scents.

He also wrote about his mother's soft bathrobe:
The warm bird feathers
And coffee in a small cup
All beautiful things
Keep your scent.

And about the uncles and aunts around him, that have all kinds of scents:
You cannot say –
Are those scents or smells
Which surround me
Like the high walls of a tall building.

And he also wrote about a dog
Which simply smelled like a wet dog!

The poet wrote about other scents – of October, of laziness, his grandpa,
frost...
until he ran out of paper,
and it started to smell like a book.
Everyone read the little poet's poems, and walked around smelling
and feeling scents, which they had never even noticed before!



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