

Biography: Edvarts Virza (originally: Jēkabs Eduards Liekna, 1883–1940) was born in Rāceņi in Emburga (present-day Salgale) parish. He was one of nine children of a farming couple – Anna and Juris. He attended the Salgale and Bauska Schools, studied law and economics in Moscow. During the 1905 Revolution, he taught himself French, so that later he and his wife, poet Elza Stērste, could popularise French poetry in Latvia. He befriended other Latvian poets, worked to find his own poetic voice, and in 1906 published his first cycle of poems in the journal "Dzelme". He was mobilised during the First World War, was a rifleman in Jukums Vācietis's regiment, wrote poetry about his fellow soldiers. Prior to independence he promoted the idea of an independent Latvia. He worked in the press, was the director of the Daile Theatre, worked at the Ministry of Education. Between 1940 and 1985, his works were effectively illegal

Synopsis: Though *Straumēni* is written in prose, Virza called this work a long poem. Using a Neo-Classical approach, the author tells a story set in the 19th century, on a country homestead in the southern region of Zemgale. At the heart of this work are the author's childhood memories and the stories he heard from his grandparents about the idyllic life of Latvian peasants. The world depicted in this book is imbued with a mythical sensibility, the yearly cycles described in it involving people as well as other living creatures. Along with work and responsibilities, the rhythms of nature and the mind change with the passage of time. For example, the entire household participates in growing and harvesting flax, and the linen fabric – which is a product of this work – serves as a symbol of unity for the people of *Straumēni*. Therefore, this process and its result must come from the entire family's shared labour.

The central figure in *Straumēni* is not any one person, but instead the entire *Straumēni* household. The reader is introduced to the traditional Latvian way of life as a welcomed guest, to whom the family shows the material and spiritual meaning of all things, seemingly outside of the context of time or history. The expressive story-telling style brings scents, tastes, and colours to life and makes this work thrilling as well as meditative. The language is euphonious and makes it easy to surrender to the flow of the story.

Excerpt

On a calm summer day, anyone would look into the depths of a lake, river, or pond. As he looks down there, he would be mesmerized by the beauty of the objects reflected in the water and will remain contemplating them longer than he would looking at them on dry ground. For there is a great difference between things real and reflected. You see the reflection: there is a birch swinging and bending to the wind, but it does so soundlessly, a bird is singing in the foliage, but its song is inaudible, and the long spears of calamus are crossing, yet their soughing is unheard, as is the dry buzzing of dragonflies at their tips. What great likeness of death is revealed to us by this world of reflection, so full of movement, yet mute!

Memory is nothing but a reflection of our past in our minds. For that reason, following the trail of memory is walking through the kingdom of the dead. Nature is spreading out around us, either in its green glory or frozen white: man acts, cries or laughs, but God has removed voice from all these movements. Only a poet who is constantly in dialogue with Him can awaken the sleeping language. He lets down a staircase from the heavens right into the yard of some house, for the previous owners to descend. But before we make their acquaintance we have to get to know the road that takes us to this house and the house itself. It is a must. Man may build a house after his own likeness but when it's finished it begins to have a life of its own. The older it is, the greater impact it has on its residents. The ghosts of the dead, who inhabit the corners of the rooms and converse as they sit by the dying embers of the hearth, turn the new owners away from any arbitrary action with their invisible and imperceptible weight. They tie them to the old misfortunes and old joys of the house with

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countless ties. And when you see the new lady of the house pace from the house to the granary or cowshed, and the man of the house walking to the horse barn, her bowed head and fast gait and his bent back copy the previous owners. Just like a tree brought from foreign lands changes its branches to the command of the sunshine and winds of its new homeland, so the command of the history of every house bends and transforms people. Our hands and feet bound, we involuntarily drag along the noble chains of the days of the past.

If you wish to get into this house from the north, you have to walk for quite a while through a pine forest, on which the sun is ruthlessly beating down. The acrid smell from the rotting forest refuse and shed needles is surpassed by the scent of resin. Molten, it rushes down the brown trunks of the pines in thin rivulets, filling the forest with the fragrance of incense burned by the sun to honor the sky. There is no sound whatsoever, except for the rustle in the dry heather, as the snakes that have been warming themselves in the hot sand of the path rush to hide. Sometimes you can hear the pine bark twist itself, separate from the trunk and fall. From the distance, the cooing of doves can be heard and when suddenly the cuckoo starts up unseen, it feels as if the cool shade of foliage has descended over you.

But now you have reached the crossroads and have no idea which way to go. You sit down on an old wide stump, which seems to have been here since the time of the plague, and for a while you only hear your heart. Then, suddenly you detect the sound a cart makes as it bumps over the roots of trees and a moment later you see the driver who has a scythe wrapped in straw in the back of the cart and a long, bent pipe between his teeth. It is a farmer who is going to the fields, you can also hear his fermented drink sloshing in a barrel that's been carefully hidden from the sun. When you ask him how to get to Straumēni, he

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takes the pipe out of his mouth and looks at you, surprised that you apparently have never been to this great house, then mutely points to the wider road and drives away.

You are once again alone, but then, after a quarter-hour-long walk, there is a striking change. The dry, resinous forest air is replaced by the moist breath of meadow grasses.

When you reach the edge of the forest and it abruptly ends, a large, grassy field spreads out in front of you, with stately oaks whose serenity has helped them transcend the earthly restlessness. These are the Lielupe meadows, which have yet to be mowed by anyone.

Sedge grass is glowing in the sun, ducks suddenly take wing only to plop back down in water shaded by deer weeds, and flowers scatter their pollen, which has already painted your shins yellow.

You no longer have anyone from whom to get directions, for at this hour everyone in Zemgale is napping either in granaries or in shady orchards. Straumēni, however, can be recognized without it. A tall, branched oak tree stands guard of this house like an archangel, with maples and lindens gathering around it. A large birch grove is warming its sleek treetops in the sun, with the trunks facing you with their dazzling whiteness. From afar, these trees cannot be viewed as individuals, they blend together in clumps, covering the buildings, with only the whitewashed threshing barn glowing through. At this hour you are the only pedestrian on the green country road, whose deep ruts are blooming with white clover and which is so narrow that two rye fields from either side entwine their ears over it. Not long ago someone has been here, however, mowing feed for the cattle – the blade of the scythe left in the clover field is still covered with green, still damp leaves of grass and flowers. You are very close to the house now, yet no one has noticed you approaching.

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Everyone and everything is asleep, and even the hops entwining the fence posts seems to be dozing. You push the tendrils aside, revealing the orchard and the yard. Apple-trees are big and old, and their branches at the top are intertwined, with the grass underneath long and lush. The orchard is resounding with healthy snoring. You take a closer look and notice a man lying under the middle tree, and the growling sounds are coming from his open mouth. He seems to have been taken unawares by this afternoon nap, so he has just dropped down in the grass, using his jacket for a pillow. A bird has decided to investigate, and is now sitting on a low branch singing and thus sweetening the sleep of God's most perfect creature. Near the wood chopping block, a big, dappled dog has stretched out and, without opening his eyes, is moving his paw to chase away flies that are trying to crawl into his nose. Cows have lain down in their outside enclosure, chewing their cud and staring into distance under the shade of the barn's roof and the big ash trees.

And then you hear a monotonous sound that is much quieter than the sound of a coffee-mill. It is quick and quiet and you hear it only because there is no other sound to be heard. Looking around, you notice a woman sitting on a bench under a large, dark green maple tree in front of the root-cellar. She has a big bowl in her lap and she is quickly churning butter with a wooden spoon. The pot of cream is next to her and she is deep into her work. Her headscarf has slid down to her shoulders as she bends over the bowl. She has dark hair, her complexion is rather dark, and the kindness of heaven lights up her eyes. Beauty has left such a deep trace in her face that time has not taken it away. It has simply added compassion, forgiveness, and understanding – the beautiful flowers that bloom in the autumn of one's life, filling it with sunny tranquility. Even though the butter churner is sitting in the shade, a fine sunbeam has broken through the foliage, falling on her head and

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rendering her akin to saintly women featured in paintings. The household is fast asleep, even the half-open window seems dreaming, only she alone is doing her work in the afternoon heat under the thick foliage and enveloped in the coolness emanating from the root-cellar. When the shade from the large oak reaches the ridge of the cowshed, she will bring the dewy butter along with rye bread to the men cutting clover and they will eat it, praising and thanking the giver.

You let your gaze take in the surroundings and, if you were restless, you become as calm as a seafarer, seeing his ship glide into the calm waters of the harbor from a stormy sea. The paths leading from the house to the granary, cattle barns, and the threshing barn and crisscrossing in the middle of the yard are as smooth and shiny as a whetstone. Many feet must be constantly moving along them, whereas now only a cat is lazily slinking around, amidst yawns. Almost all of the buildings are constructed of round logs, and the roofs protecting them are made of reeds or tiles. Things appropriate for each building have been put next to them, and they must be very old and used for a long time, because all the handles gleam.

But so that this farm would not be just a collection of buildings, it is tightly encircled by a wattle fence. The spruce wattles have long since been covered in moss, and what has rotted has been replaced by new. A lean-to is full of neatly stacked wood; the resinous logs that help to keep a fire going have been put separately from the logs burnt every day. No matter which building you look at, you see that the spots ruined by time have been tended to by a repairing human hand. And when you, unnoticed by anyone, look at this farm and peruse the work of its owners, you develop the foundation for vast constructions of thought. When

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poets talk about the permanence of human work, it is not in vain. It is not just poetry and a tower attempting to reach the sky, eternal is also any building or state protected by a diligent guardian.

You have been staring at the yard of this house for a long time, and it seems to you as if, gazing into a clear and deep well, you had seen the youthful face of your nation. Yes, it is a nation's youth when the young do not separate from the old but are attached to them like branches, sharing both silence and talk with them. And this fragment of orderliness, clarity, and obedience that you see in this house is a fragment of the vast and endless sky over my ancient Latvian land.

The midday slumbers of the Straumēni people are like the great rest taken by the Creator when he had finished His work. Yet whereas He completed his work in eternal and unchanging perfection, the work of these people is never done and they can mention divine peace only in their prayers. Their highest wisdom and happiness is the understanding of divine order and approximating it. They have guessed it and that is why they lie so happily on the ground letting trees spread their wide green fans over them, assuaging the heat of the day.

He who works is privy to the premonitions of the rooster, this strangest of birds. Just as a rooster senses the approaching dawn even in the thickest darkness, these people, even when fast asleep, know when it is time to get up. They awaken almost simultaneously – in the grass of the orchard, in the house, or in the granary. Yawning, they walk out into the yard where the bright sunshine dazzles them for a moment. There are oldsters blessed with

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saintliness, young women and men whose blood never sleeps even as their eyes are heavy with sleep, and children whose clear heads will one day shine like previously unseen stars.

The man of the house lowers the sweep, then draws up the bucket and drinks, with droplets resoundingly falling back into the well.

Sitting on the well-curb under a gorgeous willow, I listen to the stories of this old Zemgale house through the seasons; stories about my land and its dead.

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Straumēni is a very old farm, which can be seen from the large trees growing around the buildings. These are not remnants of an ancient woodland that some ancestor who has cleared the land has left for his descendants as evidence of his diligence and strength. There have never been any forests here, and nature is showing the excess of its power through the lush grass of the meadows. The meadows' grassy backs resemble water that God has decided to remain on the spot and surge with the wind for many miles from the West to the East. Centuries ago, perhaps lone oaks grew here – their blue-black fragments are found in the soil here and there. The trees around Straumēni farm were planted, because they grow in an orderly way – some at the ends of buildings, some near the doors, some in the middle of the yard. They were planted to honor Thunder, so that, riding through the sky with lightning bolts on steamy summer days, it would not crash into the roofs of buildings. Indeed, not able to contain his anger, Thunder has always dropped his bolts into the tops of these trees. The big oak in the middle of the yard has a blunt top because one fine day Thunder broke it off, leaving a nasty smell of Sulphur behind. The old linden has a hole

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because the sky rider tore a piece out of its trunk. Gradually it all hollowed out, so that bats could hang there in strings during the day, to then begin dashing over the yard at night. The trees would become green in spring and yellow in autumn, serving beauty and the necessities of life. At the bottom their bodies were rubbed smooth, because both people and animals loved to lean against them. The people of the farm considered the trees to be like themselves. And they provided the shade that moved across the lawn as men and women would sit down there on Sundays and begin their endless conversations.

The long lane from the cowshed to the pasture was planted with white willows. They were old, gnarly, and with holes, but on their tops there were strong, green shoots, which too were beginning to age. In spring they were the first to bloom, their long, yellow tassels giving off the fragrance of honey. Since the willows from the two sides of the lane met at the top, the impression for anyone walking there was of a yellow green cave, buzzing with bees, until they reached the pasture and another road.

Every tree had its own voice expressing its permanent soul that had survived through the ages. When the wind is at its strongest and it seems like all the trees unite in indecipherable hissing, one could still detect the soft soughing of the linden, the friendly chatter of the willow, and the organlike drone of the oak. Even in the dead of night, when darkness has swallowed all roads and objects, the inhabitants of this house can tell the kind of the tree by the sound it makes in the wind. In His unfathomable melting pot, God mixed all kinds, but letting them above the ground, He gave each His likeness, and those who live side by side with His creation recognize it.

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Behind the Straumēni horse barn was an enclosure that was designated not for horses but for bees. A whole variety of trees grew there and on their branches, laid horizontally, were beehives made of dry pine. It was the most sacred place on the farm. No one went there except grandfather, for he knew the bee words. Tall grass grew under the gnarly branches, and when hay season arrived, he would cut, dry, and carry the grass to the hayloft. The enclosure was called the bee church, for they never stop doing God's work. More diligently than people they follow God's dictum pronounced in Paradise about never ending work and, loving the proximity to people, buzz alongside them.

Since the trees in the enclosure kept branching out and getting ever wider, grandfather helped the bees, on their way home from the fields and meadows, to get to the hives easier by cutting some of the branches. Under the trees there was grassy calm – butterflies playing, grasshoppers hopping, their long green legs twitching, fuzzy bumblebees droning, -- overhead there was the constant buzzing of busy work. Like cows with their udders full of milk, bees were loaded down with what would become honey as they returned home only to run off again. Sounding like a lone string, the enclosure was full of movement from morning till night. Albeit the fragrances of honey and wax was always present in the enclosure, during daytime wind would pick up scents as easily as voices, mixing sounds and vapors in one big confusion. Only with the evening approaching everything regains its clear essence and, live within and for itself, lifts up. Then the fragrances in the enclosure bloomed at their fullest. A cool waft of air, followed by a light and warm current breathing caraway and other meadow grasses, and then, as if freed from all that was redundant, finally came the nectar of the gods -- the fragrance of honey and wax. Not at all ephemeral, it was slow

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and solemn, made of what is the purest on earth – sunbeams and pollen gathered from flowers.

Grandfather loved to serve at his bee church by himself, and the bees loved him and deferred to him. The reason perhaps was that he was gradually approaching the age when all that is unseemly in one's body and soul tends to depart. The sun and his years had desiccated his body, so that it resembled a well-dried linden trunk from which Latvians used to make their kokles.

In the month of June, which was swarming time, grandfather seemed to be always perched on a ladder, fumigator in hand, softly talking to God's herd of bees. No bee family ever escaped and if one, as part of reproduction, seemed ready to swarm, he calmed it down spraying it with water from a tube made from the top of a young pine tree. So he kept moving about the bee enclosure in his white tow trousers and white shirt, with each passing year coming to increasingly resemble the ancient pagan God, his sunken eyes flashing under bushy eyebrows.

The other place he could often be found was the granary, whose attic he used to dry timber for many years. When scent no longer betrayed the kind each particular tree had been but only the rings with which passing years mark birch, pine, and oak, he shaved, carved, and polished to make all kinds of vessels, barrels, and spoons. In the summer he also slept in the granary amidst his buckets and barrels full of honey the color of rusty oak leaves and the coils of yellow wax reminiscent of yellow maple leaves. He did not eat meat, subsisting on rye or rough wheat bread, milk, butter, and honey, and his spirit was therefore light and full

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of kindness. In the forest he knew all the trees, old and new, and always thinking ahead, grew the young birches, oaks, and spruces so that two-prong pitchforks could be made from them for the purpose of heaving hay or summer crops into the cart. He knew how to make the handles of pitchforks and rakes so that they would fit right in one's palm without causing blisters. Everyone on the farm used his tools as carefully as he had made them and stopped using them only when their prongs or handles were completely worn out.

Grandfather moved around the farm as if putting a magic circle around it, to be transgressed only by the wind, which shook the green, intoxicating hops on the fence. The granary attic also contained the oaken coffin with its sawdust pillow that grandfather had made with his own hands. Without the slightest trepidation he was awaiting the day when his spirit would break away from his family and, flying through the blue sky gardens, reach the great hive to which, like so many tired work bees, souls ascend every day.

The Straumēni buildings were built by different generations, and people sent from the civil parish had also worked on them, as used to be the custom. The farm had weathered much, and its buildings no longer had any newness to them that makes everything less than pleasing to the eye. Breathing on them every day, nature had made them a perfect match for the surrounding landscape and since ploughshares would sometimes touch their foundations, they seemed to be a logical extension of the fields. They sat in the middle of those fields, which stretched from them in every direction like the arms of a star. When you stood at the edge of a field, all of these arms seemed to lead to the open doors of the buildings that awaited them like wide-open mouths. And indeed, rye bloomed and swayed, wheat bronzed under the sweltering July sun, and oats and barley gave the early days of

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September a yellowish tinge for the sole purpose of those doors closing with satisfaction until the following spring.

It was the threshing barn and the shed, a large brick building with whitewashed walls and a thick reed roof, which showed patches of green moss here and there. It had served for some decades already and was prepared to serve some more, because rainwater simply rushed down the slippery reeds, which from the inside looked yellow, as if they had very recently been cut in the bend of the creek running through the fields of the farm.

The threshing barn, with its threshing floor, were more or less abandoned until the middle of the summer. As you stepped over the threshold you were enveloped in cold that came from the floor and the thick walls. The walls and the girders were covered with dust from many years of threshing, and spiders had drawn their webs over the big and small sieves and flails hanging on the wall. The shovels were stacked in the corner, half covered by a sheaf of cereal deliberately left unthreshed so that the invisible dragon of prosperity, who crawled around the eaves, lay in front of the kiln or climbed the blackened beams, would have something to feast on. If anyone in the household died during the summer, the casket would be kept on the threshing floor until the day of the funeral, so that he was plucked from the rows of the threshers for all eternity. He was put here, pale with fright, to listen to the rumbling of the flails of the Eternal Thresher, which would soon be echoed by the sound of the soil shoveled into the grave.

A small, narrow door led from the threshing floor into a blackened, dark space that smelled of dried grain and straw. A tiny window let in some weak light, which showed the thin, soot-

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covered beams which had dried to the point of resounding like bells when tapped. In

another tiny window that opened toward the threshing floor, a lantern would be placed, so that the person standing on the beams could see the sheaves to be put to be dried. Of himself, only his legs and the prongs of the pitchfork could be seen as he caught the sheaves to put them in the darkness that up there seemed to be endless.

The kiln itself was erected along the wall of the threshing floor, and one had to climb down into a pit to light it. It was made of round, heavy stones and one could not see the back wall of the opening even when it was lit. In the evening, waiting for the fire in the kiln to die down, the stoker would sit on the edge of the pit and tell endless tales about the devils on the beams. He had seen it all, this mediator between people and the devil. So the threshing barn stood there all wrapped in mystery, and the quiet smoke that lifted from its chimney in the autumn did not betray anything about the hard purification work that took place inside. Just as man is destined to go through the bitter steam-bath of sorrow on earth, so as to be able to maintain eternal joy in heaven, so the crops have to go through the intense heat of the kiln to then let off steam in the form of a freshly baked loaf of bread on people's tables. Subject to one law for all, all creatures mature to finally be molten in a bell that will ring from heavenly eaves.

The Straumēni farm is surrounded not only by grain fields but also by meadows, which are the extension of the lush flood-lands of the Lielupe, where hay is often mown three times a year. That is why there are such large barns with hay sheds at both ends. They are arranged in a semicircle, and three big ash trees are shading the open enclosure in front to protect the cows from the heat. Their bark has been torn off in places, because the big black bull that is infamous in the neighborhood has often attacked it with his strong horns. And yet they stand tall and as the sun rises, it is their tops that are the first to receive its light.