

**Biography:** Guntis Berelis (1961) was born in Cēsis, Latvia. He is Latvian prose writer and literary critic who studied physics and graduated with a degree in library science from the University of Latvia. One of Latvia's leading literary critics, he is known for his prose-like essay writing style. He has published *A History of Latvian Literature* (1999), a collection of essays about 20th-century national literature. He also runs a blog of literary reviews, studies, and criticism, called "Guntis Berelis Writes: Thoughts on Literature" (berelis.wordpress.com).

**Synopsis:** The novel is set in present-day Latvia. There are two separate story lines that are nonetheless linked conceptually and metaphorically. The two stories converge in the final pages of the book, when its two protagonists cross paths. The "Writer's story" is centered on literary historian named (coincidentally) Guntis Berelis, who is the embodiment of both a pedantically analytical mind and narrow-mindedness. Berelis the historian has made the "discovery of the century": a hitherto unknown and brilliant poet, Eduards Bīskaps, who wrote in the 1930s and managed to publish a single small volume. Bīskaps, in contrast to the boring and conservative Berelis, is the embodiment of creative passion. The rest of the story involves the relationship between Berelis and Bīskaps. Finally, after one of their conflicts, Bīskaps turns out to have vanished along with his brilliant poetry.

### Excerpt

I will get back to the beginning later – for now I'll start with the moment when, coming from the store with a bag of purchases over my shoulder I met an old man. There he was: all emaciated and frail, stooped over and clutching a cane with both hands – the very embodiment of decrepitude of old age: take the cane away and he'll drop dead; he stood on the pavement, chin digging into his chest, jaw jutting forward, and scowled at me with such fixed concentration that I began to feel uneasy. The old geezer's stare seemed to suggest

that he knew me; even worse – that he had come to cash in some old debt but – since he knew me so well – was perfectly aware that there was no hope to do so.

The pale eyes of a lunatic, the wrinkled mug scowling in a grimace of disgust, the lips twitching nervously; a gray, scraggly beard. He must be at least eighty, perhaps even older, I think. What does he want from me? Maybe the geezer has just stopped to catch his breath and gather his strength before moving on and I just happen to be in the way of his gaze?

Perhaps he doesn't even see me and is just staring into distance deep in thought or memories – who knows what oldsters like that have in mind?

Be it as it may, I had to step off the pavement onto the street to go around him. Having walked up to my apartment, I looked down. Sure enough, the old geezer was still there; now he had crossed the street and, head tilted back, stared right into my window like a mad Catholic monk who is waiting for Virgin Mary to tumble out of the hatch of the belfry. So he loitered there for a good half hour. He stood there staring, took a few steps and resumed staring, walked to the previous spot and – stared, stared, stared. I made myself some coffee and caught myself looking down from time to time as if by accident – sure enough, the geezer was still there. I looked through the newspapers, had some coffee and looked down – the old buffoon apparently had no intention of leaving. He just stood there smoking one after another and staring. I failed to register when he finally disappeared but I have to admit that failing to see him downstairs I felt I was relieved.

The evening was ruined. I had planned to work in peace on writing some commentary to Volume Two of Eduards Bīskaps's Collected Works, which contains his hitherto unpublished poems from 1936-1940 and texts from a manuscript I called *A Book of Prophecies*, for I had no idea what title would have been given to it by its author. In all likelihood, Bīskaps was not sure what to call his own book, because most of the texts were works in progress and not

much was preserved: just a few fragments and sketched in ideas. In my commentary, I wished to restore the text as close to perfection as possible and so I had launched an audacious project -- based on Bīskaps's sketches, I tried to develop the texts as Bīskaps might have written them if, for some unknown reason, he had not stopped work on the manuscript.

I had already found interesting analogies with Whitman's poetics and, strange as it may seem, with the poetry of William Blake. Some colleagues smirked at my attempts – who in the Latvia of the 1930s had read Blake? they said. At the time, only a few erudite readers were familiar with his work even in England. In other words, I was hoping to do some hearty work that night. But tough luck. I simply vegetated at the desk that was overladen with books, notes and copies of archival documents, Blake's poems to one side and the thin pile of pages constituting Bīskaps's Prophecies to the other, picking up the pages filled with my own elegant script at random, staring at the computer screen and – thinking what?

In all likelihood, I did not think anything. From time to time, I would get up, walk to the kitchen window, trying to see in the semi-darkness whether the old man might have returned. Around midnight I gave up, turned off the computer, crawled into bed, tossing and turning for a couple of hours before finally falling asleep.

The next morning, even before breakfast, I found myself taking a peek from behind the curtains and had to snigger at my own actions. Of course, the old weirdo was not down there and I had to wonder why yesterday's meeting had had such an effect on me, instilling in me even a kind of fear. There are plenty of such grizzled seniors walking the streets and furthermore – how could this man be a danger to me? Nonsense. I should pay no attention to it. I went to the archive where I had ordered documents, which – I hoped – contained facts about Bīskaps's possible ties to some artists from the 1930s, for on a rather foggy

photograph of a Tīdemanis exhibition opening I had spotted a suspiciously familiar back. I thought this back to belong to Bīskaps and, if all other people in the photograph – at least the ones that had been identified – had some sort of relationship with Tīdemanis, then it was only logical that Bīskaps too might have been acquainted both with Tīdemanis and other artists from his circle of friends. That was a lead worth pursuing.

Unfortunately, it turned out to be yet another dead end – at least for now. In the letters of some artists who had been all but forgotten nowadays and whose letters I had unearthed in the archive, I did not find any mention of Eduards Bīskaps. So I simply had to dig further – I was already used to all these dead ends, for Bīskaps was a really mysterious person.

On the way home, I stopped by the store, turned a corner and suddenly – yes, the old geezer was once again there, by the front door of my building, leaning on a cane with his left hand, smoking and of course looking me straight in the eye. The bastard was waiting. For me, of course, who else? He had on a threadbare jacket of a hard-to-identify color, much too short for him, so that his bony arms were revealed almost up to the elbows; a checkered shirt missing several buttons and black, wrinkled pants with fraying ends and worn out knees. The spindly legs ended in huge feet, which were stuck inside worn-out shoes.

Yesterday, when I only saw him as an embodiment of decrepitude, I had made a mistake.

The oldster did seem quite weak, yet one could also detect a kind of defiance and aggression in him. Old men like this tend to beg for coins at the Central Market or in the underground tunnel leading to the railway station and then use them to buy moonshine.

They have become so indifferent to the world that they are unaffected by cold, illness, people's scorn or the poking of drunken teenagers – they can withstand much and for a long time, they don't give a flying fuck about the world or about themselves. And this was exactly

the impression I got from *my* oldster (see? I had already made him mine): he finds

everything disgusting, nothing is worth it, he does not give a shit about any of it.

And yet he did not seem to belong to the homeless tribe.

His clothing, though probably picked out from the humanitarian aid supplies of some church

or bought for a song in some used clothing store, nevertheless were unsullied by his

vagabond lifestyle. His face was clean and the beard, albeit scraggly, was not unkempt and

seemed to even have been trimmed recently. And the cane – it was obvious from a distance

that many years ago it had been made by a skillful craftsman: from dark brown wood,

impressive, yet smoothed out knots where the branches had been and with a comfortable,

weighty, carved handle. One does not find canes like that in the garbage. And then this gaze

– it was like a spike aimed at me, as if it was I for whom he had been waiting, although I did

not know him from Adam. Damn it, what does he want from me?

Perhaps he will ask for money and not just five santīms but five lats? Gimme a five and I will

leave you alone, you will never see me again! It's up to you – if you don't give it to me, I will

remain standing here as your guilty conscience.

Why should you be doing well and me badly?

Old men have had unpleasant surprises in store for me more than once. I will not talk about

the terrible event with "the Angel of Death" – I would like to get rid of this memory as soon

as possible. Because of Mr. Albergs, I can no longer listen to either Mozart or Beethoven

and, upon hearing the first strains of the anthem of the European Union, my heart gives a

start. And it's all because of that fucking old conductor, Mr. Albergs, my former neighbor

from the floor above me. I won't discuss him now – maybe later, yes, later for sure.

Really, I should get rid of that. But there was also that fake prostitute, she too will have her

say in my story, and there was the blind neighbor from across the hallway, the one who

went to the movies almost every other day. He sat in the audience, listening to what was happening on the screen and then created a movie in his own mind. He knew all the latest about the movies and could weigh in like a seasoned movie critic. The worst thing was that he not only could talk about movies but insisted on doing so.

The neighbor spent afternoons lounging in the apartment and cocking his ears to hear me coming home from work. His hearing, like any blind person's, was exquisitely fine-tuned, he distinguished my footsteps in the stairwell from those of other neighbors. The reason he had chosen me as his victim was probably because I was the only one among his acquaintances – and how many acquaintances can a blind man have, right? Just a couple of relatives and some neighbors is all – to have a humanities-oriented mind. No matter how quietly I crept up the stairs, the neighbor invariably shot out of his apartment, grabbed me by the elbow and began his ranting about Coppola, Sokurov, Fellini, Greenaway and God only knows who else.

Having begun to speak, he became not only blind but also deaf – he heard neither my timid attempts at avoidance, nor interjections if the talk turned to something that was of interest to me and I tried to put forth my own version about the subject matter of my neighbor's monologue.

He no longer heard anything, probably not even himself. First, he related the plot of the movie and then proceeded with criticism of the director, actors (how he dissed Van Damme and how he praised Schwarzenegger! He loved not only highly intellectual art but also all kinds of Hollywood action flicks), composer and finally also the cameraman. Having settled scores with the film, he launched on finely conceived paragraphs on the stupid world in which we are condemned to live. Taking away his eyesight, nature had compensated by bestowing upon him not only an incredibly sensitive ear but also a devilishly supple tongue.

And I must admit that I felt a sense of relief when my neighbor died. Yes, so the old men pass, both my blind neighbor and Mr Albergs are gone.

The blind neighbor was annoying, whereas I developed a benign, albeit initially distant relationship. Truth be told, no closeness was really possible with the reserved and in his old-fashioned way always elegant Mr Albergs – the self-respect that he radiated was accompanied by a dose of aristocratic superciliousness.

Mr Albergs lived right above me and years ago as I moved in here, I heard from other neighbors that he had been an outstanding symphony orchestra conductor in his day. In his old age, radiculitis prevented him from conducting – he could no longer hold the baton. It was difficult to imagine that Mr Albergs could leave his apartment carelessly dressed. I had never seen him anything else but his dark, old-fashioned suit, carefully pressed white shirt with a tie and well-polished black shoes.

Smoking by the kitchen window, I often saw Mr Albergs coming home from the store – chin up, slightly bent backward and staring somewhere into the distance, he strode nobly and stiffly on the pavement, waving an ancient, beaten and thus particularly respectable leather briefcase.

From the looks of him, it seemed as if he was preparing to conduct at least some symphony by Beethoven, but instead of a conductor's baton, his briefcase contained nothing more interesting than a carton of milk and some buns. Mr Albergs could turn even taking down the garbage into a ritual: slowly and solemnly, he descended the stairs holding the black garbage bag a little away from his body as if it were a musical instrument, which deserved to be treated with care and respect. When we happened to run into each other on occasion, Mr Albergs always stopped, gave me a proud smile, bent his head in greeting and very loudly and distinctly announced: "Hello!" Sometimes we even exchanged a word or two,

and then Mr Albergs would recall his youth when he studied in Germany with Hans Knappertsbusch and later honed his skills in Munich, under the tutelage of Wilhelm Furtwängler (I even searched the encyclopedia to make sure that people with these impossible names had actually existed and were not a figment of Mr Albergs's senility), he generously peppered his speech with musical terms and names of well-known musicians, apparently assuming that I "as an intelligent person" – Mr Albergs always emphasized that I was an intelligent person – I found them familiar, whereas I must admit that I am only dimly aware of the history of music.

I felt great respect and even a kind of affinity for Mr Albergs, whereas the blind neighbor was nothing but an annoyance. My respect and affinity would be even greater if once or twice a month, the apartment of the reticent, old-fashioned and gallant Mr Albergs were not the setting for – I don't even know what name to give to whatever it was that took place there. It was a crazy confusion of sounds, a devilish cacophony – there was a rumble and tumble, jingling and clanging, squeaking and wailing, whining and howling, buzzing, squealing and roaring – there are no words in Latvian to adequately describe these noises. At times, the ceiling lamp was sent dangerously a-sway, the windowpanes began zinging and the radiators echoed with the voice of doom. All this went on till three or four in the morning, sometimes even till dawn. What about my sleepless nights and mornings when I felt as if terribly hung over – my thoughts stumbling and tangling with one another, the world was in a haze, my heart was thudding heavily because of the many cigarettes smoked because of the insomnia, and my fingers kept failing to hit the right keys of my computer? And yes – what about the unwritten pages of Eduards Bīskaps's biography? This hellacious noise devoured so goddamn much of my time! What was Mr Albergs doing? What were these secret passions of his that revealed themselves but a couple of nights every month?



But let Mr Albergs rest in peace; let us get back to the old man who was waiting for me at my front door. At that time, I had no idea that, compared to him, the blind neighbor was an easy to deal with creature and even Mr Albergs, if we are to ignore the tragic finale of the story, seemed a rather pleasant old man, despite his noisy pastimes.

I stepped off the pavement to make a detour around the oldster. But no – sucking on his cigarette, he trudged toward me. Smoke in the air, eyes burning, beard bristling, cane thumping against the asphalt, feet shuffling. I made an even wider circle, yet he only quickened his steps to meet me face-to-face. What could I do? I couldn't break into a run to escape an old geezer like that!

I stopped, arranging my features into an expectantly kind grimace. I think I may have even smiled inquisitively.

— Are you that Berel's guy? — the oldster asked, his voice sounding between a creak and a gasp, his eyes burning holes in me.

— So... — I mumbled noncommittally. Should I have insisted that I was not me?

Apparently the old man knew that I was "that Berel's guy" even without having to ask, for he straightened himself with a gasp – it turned out that he was quite a bit taller than I had thought because of his stoop – and I had no time to think before his cane landed on my right shoulder with a vigorous swish. My bag of purchases dropped to the ground and I howled in pain – the right arm seemed to be paralyzed and my heart did an acrobatic somersault and then my legs suddenly gave way and I dropped to my knees, clutching my shoulder with my left hand. Actually, the blow was not so hard – how much strength can such an old-timer have? – but the cane had struck a very painful place on the muscle. And I had expected anything but a blow with a cane. And he was aiming for my head! – I realized, terrified out of my wits. What if he had succeeded! The horror! The oldster let out another gasp, the

cane swished in the air and now hit me across the back, with its end landing on my kidney. I screamed and fell down flat on the ground, my nose digging into the asphalt. But that was not enough for my attacker – as I managed to get up to my hands and knees, I saw him raise his cane yet again, but this time I hardly felt the blow, just a slight tap on the ribs – he must have been drained after the first two blows. Then he suddenly lost his balance and dropped down on top of me like a heavy sack, once again flattening me to the ground.

We wriggled around there for a while, getting entangled in each other's limbs; I felt the old man's fingers stiffly grasping at my throat, yet he was so feeble that I had no trouble extricating myself from the reach of his long arms. I got up, straightened myself and, livid with anger combined with pain, fear and humiliation, I pulled the cane from under the old man, shouting something incomprehensible.

I doubt that I would have hit him – in all likelihood, I would have thrown the cane into the bushes, grabbed him by the collar and shook him. What else can one do with old geezers like this? But then a fury, a chimera, a witch, appeared in a fourth-floor window. She appeared with a deafening shout, which penetrated my eardrums like electric current: – Leave the grandpa alone! Get out of our courtyard! Scram! I will call the police! Get away from the grandpa, I am calling the police!

All we need here is the police! How are you going to convince the policemen that it is not you who, motivated by some base intent, have attacked the feeble, defenseless old man, but the other way round: this octogenarian terrorist, who is one-and-a-half legs in the grave, has given you a beating. I threw down the cane, grabbed my bag and half-running made it for the door of my building before someone else has noticed my battle with a decrepit hoodlum.

Once in the apartment, I looked through the window – the old man had managed to get to his feet and was shuffling away, from time to time casting a glance at my window over his shoulder. Upon noticing me, the bastard even shook his cane at me. I tore off my shirt and examined myself in the bathroom mirror. Sure enough – a huge bruise over my neck and shoulder; a reddish mark of the cane across the back. Tomorrow it will all be even more pronounced.

A pale puddle was spreading around the bag I had dropped in the foyer. Apparently the carton of kefir had come undone as it hit the pavement and now the entire contents of the bag – the loaf of white bread, sugar, the package of oatmeal, the smoked flounder and today's newspapers – everything -- was soaked in kefir.

And yet, strange as it may seem, the attack had somehow calmed me down. The day before I had felt even worse. Then I did not understand who this old man was, what he wanted from me and what I could expect from him. Then he seemed like some grandpa who, having been taken to the forest in a sled, has gathered all his strength and dragged himself home to gnaw at my conscience.

However, now I at least knew what the oldster wanted from me and what I could expect from him. Quite simply, he wanted to beat me up, though I still had not the slightest idea who he was and why he needed it. And the worst thing that I could expect was another cane blow at my kidneys. No, actually the worst thing really was a sense of helplessness: someone is beating me and I cannot resist. After all, I could not return the blows of an old man, no matter how much of an asshole he was. Should I purchase a canister of pepper spray and spray him in the face? Let him then cough and sputter! But what if he died from shock? The police? Hopeless. I tittered nervously, imagining three men in camouflage and

bulletproof vests with machine guns and rubber truncheons dragging the old man into a police car. He doesn't go willingly, of course. With a battle-cry involving 1905, 1919, 1941, 1991 or God only knows what other year, the old geezer is rotating the cane round his head as if he were the valiant slayer of three-headed dragons. And then there is the many-eyed neighboring hydra, driven by her insatiable curiosity to the windows – see how "that Berel's guy" is getting rid of his grandpa – dragging him to jail, to the madhouse, to the cemetery; putting him on a sled and off to the forest! No one knows of course that both my grandpas passed years ago.

Okay, let's go on. The cane is heavy and its blows are painful, but first he has to hit his target. Next time — though I hoped there would be no next time, for maybe he had spent all his fire the first time — I will not stand there like a fence post waiting to be battered. The oldster was in fact slow, clumsy and feeble. Today he was successful because he caught me unawares. Next time, if it comes, I will either avoid him or just simply take the cane away from him. Let him hobble home any which way, it's his own fault. I got into the shower and, to calm down, stood under the hot cascade for quite a while. My left arm felt stiff, I could not even move my fingers. How was I to write if my fingers on the keyboard would fail to keep up with my thoughts? The fucking terrorist! I had in fact thought for some time that all these old fogeys and old hags were a dangerous and mysterious phenomenon. They sit in their apartments, wander through the streets and parks and we hardly pay any attention to them – they seem to us half-witted and with one foot in the grave. We do not take them seriously (who ever took seriously one's grandmother with whom, as a child, one could squabble and on whom one could play tricks to one's heart's content?) We forget that just twenty or thirty years ago these oldsters were strong men full of life who had some say in the world and who could not be discounted. And that vigor does not disappear, it just hides

somewhere in the back of their consciousness. We can only guess what happens in these minds, what inner storms, passions and pathologies hide behind the wrinkled, seemingly indifferent, masklike mugs.

Inadvertently, my thoughts returned to Mr Albergs and his night entertainment. One time I failed to keep my calm and, having met Mr Albergs in the stairwell, let him know that I was mystified (even though I was really angry, the dignified attitude of Mr Albergs prevented me from using stronger language) by the strange sounds coming from his apartment the night before.

— You heard it?! — Mr Albergs's voice quaked in excitement and he raised his arms in a wide gesture as if he was about to give me a lesson in conducting. — We managed Brahms's "Hungarian Dance" pretty well, don't you think? There is still some fire in the old bones, no? And Mahler? I don't think much of the modernists, but sometimes when fancy strikes we do Mahler and Schoenberg, and Webern. Most of the time, however, we reach for the timeless values — Bach, Mozart, Chopin. Well, you know what I mean. For me, the history of music ends with Liszt. Yet I tolerate other views as well. As a young man, you probably prefer jazz.

— Sometimes, when fancy strikes, we do something unpretentious — Gershwin or some such. We have improvisers who can blow the devil out of the trumpet or trombone!

Mr Albergs gave me a proud smile, then, after a brief pause, he straightened himself and said with a little bow: — Mr Berelis, I know that you are a very busy man, and yet, should you have an hour or two, I would be honored to have you participate in our next "Eine kleine Nachtmusik" event. Of course, should you fancy to do so.

The expression on his face as well as his intonation indicated absolute conviction that participation in the "Kleine Nachtmusik" event was my most passionate desire. Then there was another pause after which he shook his head sadly and added:

— You can no longer talk about any skill — fingers are stiff and there are all kinds of age-related ailments. And insomnia — that's why we play at night! But you will have an opportunity to meet legendary personalities! Legendary! All of prewar music in my apartment! And believe me, we used to have outstanding musicians. You will not hear these men anywhere else, except some museums or collectors may have the old Bellacord recordings.

Then, periodically getting lost in lengthy rhetorical phrases and accompanying his monologue with smooth sweeps of his conductor's hands, Mr Albergs told me the story of the "Kleine Nachtmusik" events. It could be summarized as follows. Once or twice every month, old musicians gathered at his place. His former colleagues from the Liepāja Opera Orchestra (— Yes, yes, Mr Berelis, don't act so surprised; many have forgotten it but at one time we had an opera in Liepāja and I tell you, we may have been provincial, yet we compensated by enthusiasm and passion — you would never hear anything comparable at the opera in Riga!), the ones still remaining, came to his place, so did violinists, pianists, brass and even an opera singer or two.

Mr Albergs had particularly good things to say about the level of the musicians, for instance, the double-bass player maestro Cinītis and his spouse who was a flutist — having begun playing together in the 1930s, they were doing so to this day — at their own home and that of Mr Albergs. I immediately recalled having seen this couple — maestro Cinītis had blockaded the stairwell and I could not get past him. To carry a double-bass to the fourth floor is no mean task, particularly if we take into account that maestro Cinītis's years of youthful vigor were in the distant past — so the two of them, Mr and Mrs Cinītis, tried to lug the instrument up the stairs, making the kind of ruckus a whole brigade of men carrying a concert grand might cause. Mrs Cinītis kept scolding Mr Cinītis in a shrill voice, while the

latter, carrying the fat end of the double-bass continually got stuck at the turns and was gasping for breath. It must have been maestro Cinītis double-bass that kept producing the horrifying low frequency sounds, which made my windowpanes vibrate at night.

I accepted Mr Albergs's invitation – after all, I would be kept up anyway. The beginning of "Kleine Nachtmusik" was set for 9:00 p.m., but the elderly ladies and gentlemen took their time arriving. The normally reticent Mr Albergs had become an incredibly active host.

Responding to the doorbell, he half-ran to the foyer, opened the door, letting in the guests, shook their hands, patted their shoulders and addressed them as maestros, not forgetting to ask after their health and creative achievement; without listening to reply, he returned to the room at a trot, busying himself with chairs, teacups and biscuits. From time to time, he appeared behind my back and, pressing to my ear, began whispering loud introductions to the arrivals, attaching lengthy and, for the most part, unfinished monologues about the once outstanding musicians.

— Mrs Teivišs, — Mr Albergs announced in an important voice, inconspicuously pointing out a tiny, decrepit old lady who was barely dragging her feet and never opened her mouth, only listening intently. He seemed to expect me to gasp in awe or at least to raise my eyebrows in surprise, but then, upon seeing that this name does not mean a thing to me, he let out a sigh and, shaking his head, explained.

— It's our prima donna. She was a star at the Liepāja opera, a mezzosoprano. First came Carmen, for any mezzosoprano, it's the coming-of-age role, then Amneris in *Aida* and Princess Eboli in *Don Carlos*. There was no comparison with Herta Lūse, of course, that's a different class entirely, but as Lūse walked onto the stage, she just remained standing there motionless like a haystack. Whereas our Mrs Teivišs – the temperament! If you only had seen Mrs Teivišs in her best years as Carmen! A tempest on stage, to put it mildly! Suddenly

Mr Albergs broke into a hummed version of Carmen's aria, spreading his arms and taking a few steps, energetically clicking his heels.

At least five times he insisted on pushing to the center of the room and introduced

— Ladies and gentlemen, we have a guest tonight! — clapping his hands, Mr Albergs

shouted, but the guests did not pay me the slightest attention. They seemed not to have

figured out — or rather, showed no interest in — who I really was and what role I was

supposed to play at the "Kleine Nachtmusik" event. Albeit small, that role was important — I

was the only audience. And there really was much to see — a whole parade of age-related

illnesses. No one seemed to be younger than eighty and some looked to be about a hundred

—gnarled, yet incredibly lively creatures.

Stiff, bent, hump-backed, huffing, puffing, moaning; some bloated, others desiccated, they

wandered around the apartment without letting the instrument cases out of their hands —

they must have been afraid to forget them in some corner. And there was no polite and

restrained silence, the kind that should reign in a meeting of old and respectable musicians.

Most of them were hard of hearing, therefore they called to each other in loud and screechy

voices, shouting news or old memories into each other's ears. I found out that maestro

Valters had ended up in the hospital yet again ("Yes, yes, with the same old problem!"),

maestro Zakrevskis was under house arrest, imposed by his grandchildren ("The poor thing

could not find his way home last time; he wandered around Mežciems till late at night and

they had to call the police; so now they are not letting him out alone!") and maestro Eglavs

had died altogether. He had tried to play Mozart's "Requiem" on his saxophone, but,

overcome by the emotion of the motif at "Dies irae, Dies illa", he choked on the sax

mouthpiece and kicked the bucket. — Maestro Eglavs was our only saxophone player, —

said the pianist leaning against the windowsill right next to me — Mr Albergs called him not



just maestro Baltgailis, but my dear maestro Baltgailis and paid his respects to him in all kinds of ways.

— He was crazy, that's for sure. Mozart on a saxophone, who ever heard of such a thing! Mozart of course will do fine without that sax, but what will we do when we play 20<sup>th</sup> century music I have no idea.

Well, no one knows by how many minutes listening to the "Requiem" shortens one's life. Of how many hours and unwritten pages Mozart has robbed me? Have you tried to fall asleep as the chamber orchestra on the floor above you is going about the "Eine kleine Nachtmusik" or "Jupiter"? Just a couple of bars and then again from the top. An endless number of times. How much is taken from your life if all night you are forced to listen to Mozart all night long?

How long could you listen to the "Requiem" before going crazy or kicking the bucket? I hate Mozart. It is no surprise that maestro Eglavs died playing Mozart.

While I gave in to that kind of contemplation, the noise died down, the oldsters opened their battered and dented instrument cases, pulled out their violins, violas, flutes and clarinets and for some moments everyone scraped and blew on their own, trying out and tuning their instruments.

A pianist, "my dear maestro Baltgailis", sat down by the piano and, his head bent, played some chords with his left hand. Suddenly I noticed that he in fact has only one hand, the left one, and the empty sleeve of the right arm is tucked into his pocket. A brief moment of silence followed. Demanding everyone's attention, Mr Albergs walked to the middle of the room, straightened out, threw back his head, opened his arms in a distinguished manner – his fingers bent with radiculitis that I for some reason associated with the bloodthirsty claws of a vampire – and, after a wave of his hands, the oldsters energetically set about playing...

What? I have no idea. No matter how much I tried, I could not figure out whether it was Bach or Offenbach, or perhaps some Shamanic ritual dance. From time to time, far in the background, I could detect a vaguely familiar melody, but soon enough it was drowned out by a chaos of disjointed sound. Some lagged behind while others rushed ahead and then waited awhile for the rest to catch up, so they could resume playing, but perhaps each and every one of them was playing something of their own.

In any case, no one used a score and hardly anyone paid attention to Mr Albergs's chaotic hand movements. The delicate Mrs Cinītis, the flutist, sometimes got short of breath, which made her, eyes popping out of her head, pull away from the flute and gasp for air. The first violin, maestro Grīnbergs, who was so fat that his many chins cascaded over the belly of the violin, for a while gave up making music and, having stepped aside, plopped down on a sofa and, all sweaty, caressed the area of his heart for quite some time.

This garbled the melody even further, the oldsters took the violins off their shoulders, took the mouthpieces out of their mouths, propped the cellos against the wall and for a while argued quite as fiercely as they had played, throwing about musical terms – they shouted about bars and scales, counterpoints and polyphony, about harmonies and consonances and God only knows what else.

After the argument was over, they resumed playing. This was repeated several times. When, with the good Lord's help or, in fact, without the least bit of it, the composition had been brought to an end, they started on a new one.

No matter how vigorous the old musicians were, they too needed some rest. During the break, Mr Albergs came up to me.

— An outstanding talent! — he whispered, motioning toward the one-armed pianist.

— Matchless! In 1938, he won at the Chopin Competition in Warsaw and after that he was invited to Paris! And Queen Elisabeth's Competition in Brussels! The ovations! May we all have such a star moment. And yes, then Tiflis, soon after the Great Milda --- I am referring to Milda Brehmane-Štengele, right? – he went to Tiflis, where the crazy Georgians almost came to blows over tickets to his only performance; then a tour across half of Russia! True, at that time, he still had both hands. He used to say that Baltgailis would soon be known at least as well as Emilis Melngailis. But then the war broke out and a bomb in Germany tore off his right arm – only a stump remained. That is really tragic – all his brilliant future lost – who remembers Baltgailis today...

The one-armed man, having heard some of what Mr Albergs had said, rushed toward us, shouting for the entire apartment to hear:

— Pay no attention to me having just one arm! I can still manage quite a few piano duets with my left one! Wittgenstein's brother also had just one arm, but he played concerts! Ravel has a piano concerto written specially for the left hand! And Imre Ungar – he was blind as a bat, but he played and even came to Riga – I was at that concert – I listened and observed! Sure, it was oversweet, and yet – he was blind but he played! And he got applause! Could you conduct anything with one hand? Nope! Not one thing! But I play – even if just Ravel. And I will go on playing!

It was true, "my dear maestro Baltgailis" was indeed playing with his only hand, but I cannot say how masterful that playing was, for I could not pick out the piano from the chaos of sound. Among the "Kleine Nachtmusik" gang, there was another pianist, with two hands, and with the left side of his face partially paralyzed. The terrible grimace of his mouth and the totally crooked nose made him look less a pianist than a boxer who had experienced many knockouts. His lips failed to cooperate, therefore he spoke in short, abrupt phrases:

after getting out two or three words, he pursed his lips, grimaced, swallowed his saliva and then got out the rest of the phrase in another short burst. It was not easy to follow him, for one had to keep in mind the first fragment of the sentence and, after the pause, put both parts together.

— Laurinovičs, — Mr Albergs announced as he introduced us — no commentary, not even the obligatory "maestro". I guessed that in this hierarchy of musicians, Laurinovičs stood on the lowest rung. No one socialized with him and Laurinovičs, slumped in the corner, from time to time taking a swig from the flask he had brought along. Maestro Baltgailis whispered to me that Laurinovičs sometimes played the piano — and even quite decently —, yet he lacked a conservatory education, had played at bars all his life and was attending the "Kleine Nachtmusik" events uninvited.

— Nobody has invited him, but he keeps coming, getting drunk and then getting totally out of hand, — "my dear maestro Baltgailis" complained. — Sometimes it leads to a complete ruckus. We are not sure what to do with him.

Soon after midnight, already slightly inebriated, Laurinovičs used a pause during the communal music making to get to the piano and proceeded to bang out something chaotic with stiff fingers, from time to time shouting something angry about Scott Joplin and Robinson. Mr Albergs tried to be patient, for my benefit demonstrating suffering expressions from a distance and then, clapping his hands loudly, tried to unseat Laurinovičs.

— Mr Laurinovičs, don't be so selfish, others too want to make music, but there is only one piano!

— My syncopes! Where would you! Hear anything! Even close! How! They! Stuck! Before the war jazz in Riga! Was in Jewish hands! You needed iron guts! To enter! That mafia! But I did! Oscar Strok! Huh? Remember? You sat at the table! In Alhambra! Drank like a fish!

Think I didn't see? I don't remember? Huh? And you were salivating! When Strok's salon band! Launched into a tango! "Black Eyes", no? And who sat at the piano? Remember! That? Me! It was me! At the piano! Together with Strok! And! With Mark Lavry! Also! I was! The only Latvian! In the whole band! Huh?

— Mr Laurinovičs, here most of us are classical musicians, and your rag does not seem attractive to us!

— But what about! Stravinsky? Stravinsky! Has no! Authority for you? "Ragtime for 11 instruments"! Huh! And Shalyapin! When he sang Strok's songs! Huh? —Laurinovičs shouted.

— Stravinsky is a big nothing to me. And I couldn't care less about dodecaphony, that stupid serial music, — Mr Albergs rapped out with unexpected harshness, while trying to unseat Laurinovičs from the piano bench.

Offended, Mr Laurinovičs moved to the kitchen and pined away there, smoking and slowly sipping from his flask of peppered vodka. I joined him — Beethoven's Ninth seemed to be the current order of business — well, the one that contains "Ode to Joy". In any case, the bleats of brass and the wailing of the clarinet were so wild that right away I recognized it as Beethoven. Compositions of a deaf man played by an orchestra of half-deaf musicians — believe you me, it's a challenge for any hearing person. When I closed the kitchen door, the shrill sounds were at least somewhat muted.

After a while, the deflated Mr Laurinovičs seemed to come to life — his crooked mouth took on a defiant grimace, his nose pointed to the ceiling and hands began to perform some disjointed rhythm — first on his thighs, then on the edge of the table. At times, he suddenly turned to the side sharply and hit the cupboard with his tiny fist. As he was getting more and more excited, he jumped up and started drumming with any object at hand — the

handle of a knife, a lid, a broom handle; Mr Laurinovičs bounced around the kitchen, spinning like a top, letting out shouts in an incomprehensible language; he drummed at the table, the sink, the windowsill, the panes, the radiators. Now it became clear to me why sometimes I seemed to hear something approximating the sound of heavy bells and at other times, something vaguely resembling the "Turkish March" coming from my radiators.

— See! Isn't! This! Music! — Mr Laurinovičs shouted.

— If only! You! Had seen me! Before the war!

But then the flask was almost empty and, having shaken the last few drops in his gullet, Mr Laurinovičs slumped down again. Having sat there silent and contemplative for a while, he suddenly leaned down and produced something like a black pot or jug from a worn bag that was under the table. He placed the object on his knees and began to slap a regular, grimly monotonous rhythm on it, moving his body along with the beat and staring into the kitchen wall with unseeing eyes. The slapping sound he made was the farthest thing from music.

— Mr Laurinovičs, that thing is not really making much sound, — I ventured.

— I know. It's no. Musical instrument. After all, — he said, bringing the pot up to my face. — Look!

The pot bore the raised inscription "Emīlija Laurinoviča" — and the year, which I failed to note, because Mr Laurinovičs once again cradled the pot in his lap.

— An urn, — he explained. — With ashes. Emy. My wifey.

I loved her, very much. Went together everywhere. She sat at the bar, sipped tea and watched me play the piano. Scott Joplin! Robinson, oooh! Well, you know.

She had no sense. Of music. No ear. And she didn't. Like it either. She said. What's that strumming. Good for. But she kept looking. At me. She came for me. Sat there for hours. To the end. Of her days.

Mr Laurinovičs let out a heavy sigh and hugged the pot, leaning his chin against it. He may have even shed a tear or two. Then he announced:

— Once dead — let her become music! At first. We put her in a grave. As is the custom.

But I really wanted. A memento. From her. So that Emy. And music. Would become one. I talked to some bums. To dig her up. I wanted her femur. You know that instrument.

Kangling. Do you? Of course you don't. Nobody does. It's a trumpet. Made from a femur.

The Tibetans play it. Roerich. Brought one. Rudzītis told me. He had seen it. So I wanted. To make a kangling. From my wifey. What blowing it would be! To commemorate her.

Wonderful. Finally she'd be playing. But no. The bums decided. I was crazy. They ran away.

Then I went. To talk. To the authorities of the cemetery and crematorium. And others. Took

a long time. And many papers. Spent a lot of money. Had to borrow. We dug up Emy. Put

her in the oven. Before I begged them for the femur. They too decided I was nuts. Sure,

what else they could think. When you say. That you want. To cut off a dead woman's leg.

But they did. Cleaned it off. All as it should be. I poured the ashes. In the urn. Now I keep

carrying Emy with me. Everywhere I go. Now I have a drum. When I'm upset. I just drum.

Remember her. It helps. No matter that it doesn't make. Much sound. It's more. For myself.

— And the kangling? — I asked.

— Didn't work. The trumpet. Couldn't make it. It's hanging at home. On the wall. Just hisses.

Can't get out a melody. Only ruined the bone. Should have done it. Right away. Should have.

Cut off both legs. Now I know where the holes should go. If only I had the other femur! But

too late. It is what it is.

— You can probably get another bone. Get it from the anatomical theater, for instance,

— I suggested — if they knew that the need was serious they'd help you. After all, medical students get skulls. They say the dorms are full of them. They must have got them somewhere.

— To blow the bones of strangers! No way! Yuk! To put it in my mouth!

The femur! Of a stranger! — Mr Laurinovičs sounded indignant. — But the drum.

I will make a better one. I will save some money. I have found a craftsman. A wooden one.

Encased in leather. And the ashes inside. It will rumble! Emy and I will play! They can shove!

Their Beethoven!

Seemingly having made his peace with the world, Mr Laurinovičs continued to slap his urn quietly and I returned to the room where the musicians seemed to have really got lost with their Beethoven and now were having a pretty nasty quarrel. Mr Albergs, rubbing his hands nervously, kept getting in the middle, at times trying to quiet the quarreling parties down, at other times attempting to outshout them, suggesting to play "Ode to Joy" or at least "Eine kleine Nachtmusik". To me it seemed that the quarrel had to do with medicine — I heard arthritis and prostatitis mentioned, as well as angina and kidney stones, cirrhosis of the liver and chronic constipation, all kinds of cancer and God knows what else, but the medical terms were diluted with musical ones — sonatas, hymns, songs and odes, quartets, sextets and quintets.

— Here we go again,— Mr Albergs sounded almost desperate. — We are unable to agree on anything. We'll be lucky not to come to blows. Ambition, sheer ambition — I tell you, as artists age, instead of disappearing, it gets keener. You know, there are some among us who even do some composing...

And then the doorbell rang, interrupting Mr Albergs and the shouting match.



Guntis Berelis "Ugunīgi vērši ar zelta ragiem" [Fiery Oxen with Golden Horns]

Excerpt

Translated by Ieva Lešinska