

Doris KAREVA

A prose piece and poems.

### A Lesson of Harmony

As a child of four or five, I used to long for paints and paper, so that I could draw to my heart's content. My father gave me a piece of the most ordinary kind of brown cardboard, a glass of water and a fine paintbrush, and said: this is all we need. To prove his words, he took the wet brush and sketched a landscape on the cardboard. By the time he reached the bottom corner, the top of the picture already started to fade. For me, this magical boundless landscape has remained the symbol of human existence. Our means are limited, our possibilities limitless.

At the Tallinn Academy of Music where my father used to work, his official title was the Master of Harmony. This never ceased to amaze me, since being a choleric person, a chain smoker and an alcoholic, his whole life was in opposition to the *sectio aurea*, the balance point of the pendulum which he as an admirer of Greek culture so ardently championed. Only later have I understood – perhaps the essence of harmony is embodied in striving, not in surviving – in never-ending movement, in setting a new balance every moment – or perhaps survival becomes possible only through striving – like riding the waves on a surfboard.

Isn't what we call beauty in fact essentially grace? Grace – so different in a tiger or gazelle – is born through precisely perceiving one's own self and the surrounding world, through correctly evaluating one's chances and using them to the full. Grace can only increase by way of precision, unlike strength, which can increase endlessly. Grace is strength with intelligence, the skill of managing with very little, the capacity to recognize the necessary, and the courage to give up the excessive. Grace is born from trust – and there are many possibilities there too. A child trusts naturally, because he has not experienced disappointment. A pilot trusts, on the other hand, because of experience, being in control. A lover trusts – believes, hopes and loves – despite everything, risking all. Love blinds fear, as fear can blind love – these two exclude each other. The trust of a lover - opening up in all one's vulnerability - is the greatest expression of humanity; this is what constitutes the supreme grace - the perception of one's place in the world, one's fragility and fortuity - and readiness to act despite that, the ultimate devotion and creativity.

One of my books, selected verse, is called 'Days of Grace' (*Armuaeg*). This is a legal term marking the time between the pronouncement of capital punishment and its implementation. The whole of human life may be interpreted as days of grace - being aware of one's mortality, but not the moment of death. Born out of love, we are at the same time born for love; the time, the length of which we do not know, but can measure the depth of, gives us a chance to realize love, do good - at least strive towards what we consider most important and valuable at any given moment.

Towards the end of his life when my father lost both his legs and the capacity to move his right hand, he rebuilt his piano with his remaining left hand. At nights, tortured by phantom pains that did not let him sleep, he created perhaps the best opuses of his life. And in the daytime, he took endless pictures of the views opening from the balcony of the apartment block where he lived. For my father, each tiniest change - a pram hoisted to the balcony of the house opposite, a passing bird, shower of rain - was worth recording. It occurred to me only years later how these numerous, tedious packets of photographs in their own way rhymed with the piece of cardboard from my childhood. When there is no more space, time expands.

At my father's deathbed, I held his hand, feeling his soul leave his body. His last words, uttered with half closed eyes, were: 'Up...up...' And then, still guessing, I understood: when there is no more time, space expands.

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## Concerto Strumenti e Voce

Andromeda, mandragora,  
rhododendron, mandala,  
dandy, candy, Cassiopeia,  
Christiania;  
mania grandiosa, rosa mundi,  
gloria!  
laurel, laurel, coriander,  
oregano, oleander, Romeo and Juliet,  
androgyne and salamander,  
Alexandria.

Sirius, strings, viola, tequila,  
Aeolus, Nile, iota, iota,  
Oibibio, Iphigenia,  
Louis!

Crete, éclair, criteria, cripple and crap,  
Catechism cut in two, too-too,  
Caracul, curriculum vitae, crooks,  
caramba! -  
Clara gave Carl a clarinet,  
Carl!  
Carl snatched Clara's corals,  
Cucumber cool!

Kama Sutra, cabala, nits and gnats, newts,  
maîtresse, Mae West, Miss Universe,  
misdeed? Striptease, reprise:

Tantra, mantra, yantra.

Tantra, mantra, yantra.

Mater, mater dolorosa,

hosannah, rosamanna,

Asterix, crucifix,

aquarelle, parallel-Ariel,

el-el-el-electro-shock!

Deadlock.

Urdmurt, Buriat,

purple, jasper and pitch.

Auschwitz.

Andalusian bitch.

Adenoid, asteroid, ecumenic

hypnoid.

Dalai-Lloyd, tomb and doom,

gloom, glum, jubulum,

drum, dumb,

dumb,

dumb.

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### Pygmalion

A poem in stone like a sleeping beauty,  
only her brow is visible; a divine brow,  
hinting at the light and spirit of the world,  
the serene sense of the universe.

Trembling you approach, stop short -

ah, does your heart dare? - you reach out,  
snap off a piece of stone, with growing passion  
you strike again and again, spark by spark  
you near the core of an instant, carefully  
uncovering your own living longing.  
Striving for the sublime, Pygmalion,  
you peel all that is superfluous from her light  
body, her powerful fiery wings,  
down to the last fingernail you release  
her pulsating flesh from the sharp stone.  
The poem stirs, opens her eyes and  
flexes her freed limbs, then bursts into  
peals of playful laughter: alive! More beautiful  
than anything ever encountered in this world,  
she speaks to you in your own voice, wording  
your innermost fortune - you fall before her,  
in fear and ecstasy you sink down  
among splinters, blood and tears:  
but over your lifeless body, Pygmalion,  
your love sings and sings -  
impossible, invincible, sacred.

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### Midas

All that he touches turns into poetry.  
And tears lump in the throat. A child's hurt and fury,

loneliness and loss, chance encounters and aimlessness,  
the city, the city, endless archways and courtyards,  
alcoves, alcohol, dull desperate disdain  
for doing and being.

He falls flat on his face onto a word scratched in stone,  
his shoulders shake, he seems to weep.

But his eyes are wide open; no one sees what he sees.

A cat steps out from behind a bin. Stops. Says miaow.

He turns and looks. Slowly bows.

Reaches out and strokes it.

And there and then the cat turns into a poem.

Miaow.

\*

## Enigma

1

Her perfect pearly succession of days  
seems to shine - a measured passing parade -  
yet nervous the thread, wavering the wall behind  
and bitter the myriad cares.

Ah, when the time comes,  
all plumes, silks and glory,  
all sweet melting hours,  
her magic reign -  
she will renounce it all  
in a flash.

But in one thing she cannot be forced.

One thing she will not yield  
even when faced with the worst.

Silently she clings, as to her beloved,  
to the most inconceivable torture;  
wilfully bearing to the end of time  
her love, that heavy unreasoning cross -  
a mute  
blade of truth stuck fast in her breast.

This sets her apart.

This is  
her inexplicable secret strength, her spell,  
her flame and fountain and fortress.

2

Her every kiss is a poem in life's language;  
each poem a kiss where there quivers  
concealed a flame-charming riddle -  
love-death,  
a hymn, resurrection.

Her every word is a lightning arc of flame;  
the dark water of silence  
multiplies a thousandfold the message:  
cherish the living.

Her heart beats  
silently, touched only  
by the finger of faithfulness.

3

I am now parted  
from those for whom I was created.  
A stone yearns, trees arch against glass.  
As the sea is still, my heart is green -  
at times.

The depths of thoughts are unplumbed.

I have believed in so many dreams,  
travelled so many roads,  
that my heart aches - at times -  
with incurable joy.

Even light breaks against rain-years from time to time,  
quivering it sinks, alive, into my interstices,  
a wondrous long rainbow  
fills me.

4

Colour of the seabed, you hide the summer,  
ripply, light, laurel, coral,  
surrender, myrtle, mother-of-pearl, pitch.  
A delicate distant chiming



carries your voice, sap-filled,  
and bitter.

Under an intoxicating August moon  
the kiss of secret speech,  
the Master's sanctuary,  
- Margarita, Margarita! -  
filters into citrus music.

Colour of the sunset, you gild the summer's  
fresh face: laurel and coral,  
promises, flame, amber,  
intimacy fading into infinity  
like an ocean of stars;  
meaning laughs at night's reflections.

5

Starfish sometimes shape words of mystery,  
their thought creates medusas and swordfish,  
and stirs up small shiny pearls.

Glowing green darkness, swarming  
with thousands of specks,  
a world of motes bearing divine meaning  
gently, urgently encircles, enfolds and draws  
you down to the deep,  
you, embryo with a stranger's eyes.

For you understand only that which is fathomless  
like your own heart.

For you love only that strength which endlessly  
swells and subsides,  
rises and falls, full of the secret of beauty  
unintended, unattainable.

*Translated from the Estonian by Miriam McIlfatrick*

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### Other poems

Every day,  
every night  
someone appears  
eyes seared.

Never a word  
of what he saw  
in the land  
of the living

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I dreamt that I heard Satan speak -  
but in your voice. In his slow descent  
into rack and ruin, he gave me  
a glass vessel with a warning: Behold.  
Here is death.

\*\*\*

Rainbow-coloured confusion bears us  
from the hush of the womb to the swoon of death.  
I thought that love was a feeling,  
now I see it is more - a mode of existence.

\*\*\*

I cling to you like flesh to pain  
gripped by fear of inevitable numbness.  
I suspect that what has no foothold here on earth  
becomes a stairway through oblivion to heaven.

I mean truth. Or beauty, if you will.  
I cling to you like fruit to the tree.  
I know that those filled with another life,  
are lost for words in this one.

\*\*\*

Viewing the rainbowing world,  
I chose black as my badge;  
the throbbing truth  
from the bottom of false worlds -  
mother-blind,  
prior to love and knowledge -  
right here behind my eyes.

Everything comes to an end, decays, recurs,

presents a new face - but I know that,  
even with my eyes closed I know that stony hand,  
that ample lap.

Amid the thrashing throng of colours,  
of profuse splendour, stands a figure,  
straight and black, en route to the void.  
The bundle by its feet suddenly becomes  
the dot of an exclamation mark.

\*\*\*

No time to write the final draft  
within this lifetime.  
Leave as it is  
the thorny tangled thicket of corrections.

The eye does not discern,  
what the heart is able to see.

And do not crave clarity -  
the ultimate  
lies not within this life.

Just a touch,  
the tiniest tremor,  
an inkling of a miracle

is bestowed with breath  
in your mortal mouth.

\*\*\*

Burnt poems

Alive all around you

Their whisper, rustle and crackle

A child's clear-voiced prayer

A deep-throated cry for help.

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### Poems

For all

who have gone astray at sea,

for all

who have spilled the day,

I pray tonight

in the fading light of the candles,

from a tiring heart's

last pain and power I pray.

Come,

tramps, crooks and cripples,

vagabonds and courtesans,

chiromancers and pimps,

loafers, liars, junkies,

bums, boozers and prodigals;

you, the frightened, the hungry, the cold,

you, who were born unfathered,

you, turned down by the world,

you, who've been lost and despaired for so long —

you'll get the softest beds for rest  
tonight.

For you I will set the table,  
fine wines and delicious dishes —  
come.

I shall recognize you,  
there must be some of your blood in mine...  
Only for one, the gate will fall silent.  
Sadist, you are a stranger to me.

Kõikide eest,  
kes on eksinud ulgumerel,  
kõikide pärast,  
kes päeva on pillanud käest,  
palun ma täna  
küünalde kaduval valgel  
väsiva südame viimasest  
valust ja väest.  
Tulge,  
hulgused, sulid, sandid,  
vagabundid ja kurtisaanid,  
kupeldajad ja hiromandid,  
loodrid, luiskajad, narkomaanid,  
pätid, priiskajad, joomahullud,  
kel on hirm, kel on nälg, kel on külm,  
kes on isatult ilmale tulnud,  
kellest pöördunud ära maailm,  
kes on eksind ja ahastand kaua —  
saate puhkuseks pehmeimad toad  
täna ööl.

Teile katan ma laua,  
peened veinid ja parimad road —

tulge, tulge.

Ma tunnen teid ära,  
teie verd voolab minuski vist...  
Ainult ühe ees vakatab värav.  
Ainult sind ma ei tunne, sadist.

\*\*\*

The world is forgotten, transforming and flowing.  
All once assembled will merge and be lost.  
Blood conveying salt of the stars,  
a purple pulse beats in the memory:  
don't believe! Your being is past.  
Don't fear — it all repeats in the mind.  
Only what never really happened  
is always at hand.

Maailm ununeb, moondub ja voolab.  
Kõik, mis koguneb, koondub ja kaob.  
Veres rändamas tähtede soola,  
mälus purpursed pulsina taob:  
ära usu! Su olev on olnu.  
Ära karda – kõik kordumas pääs.  
Mida päriselt kunagi polnud,  
on ainus, mis alati käes.

\*\*\*

For one more while, at the table I stayed  
amid the high, echoing halls.  
All of my friends have passed away  
or taken flight abroad.  
How dark the mead.

How strong,  
how bottomless seems the mug!  
And still, and still, and still,  
the blow of grace has not been struck!  
Jäin korraks veel istuma lauda  
kesk kõrgeid kõlavaid saale.  
Kõik sõbrad on läinud hauda  
või põgenend välismaale.  
Kui tume mõdu.  
Kui kange,  
kui põhjatu tundub see toop!  
Ja ikka ei lange, ei lange,  
ei lange veel halastav hoop!

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The breaker of dreams, my senses'  
wildest mirror — the night  
lives on your tongue. On your brow  
there is a monstrous seal.  
The crushing, smashing,  
dazzling, pearling  
hour of the waking of your  
heart, that beautiful beast —  
seize its freedom, then throw it  
into the speed of light.  
Unedemurdja, mu meelte  
meeletu peegel – öö  
elab su keelel ja kulmul  
pitser on peletu.  
Purustav, põrmustav,  
pimestav, pärlendav  
tund, mil sus ärkab



süda, see ilus kiskja –  
taba ta vabadus, siis  
valguskiiruse viska.

\*\*\*

Of all pains  
that seize us,  
sooner or later  
we choose one  
and let it  
pour into us  
to cast our  
spirits. That is  
our fate,  
the self-casting pain;  
that is our innermost  
essence and form.

Kõikidest valudest,  
mis meid valdavad,  
varem või hiljem  
me valime ühe,  
millel me laseme  
endasse valguda  
ning meie vaimu  
vormida. See  
ongi me saatus,  
me enesevalu;  
see on me sisim  
valu ja vorm.

\*\*\*

Two.

There are two who I ask,  
who I listen to,

two whose judgment I fear.

A pendulum moves through the silence,  
sand trickles through the void —  
nearer and nearer. Each while.

Between the two I falter, pale,  
my eyes half-bound,

once towards one,

once towards the other

I gravitate and vanish.

The distance between them fades away,  
my back becomes clearer and clearer,  
the steps become shorter and shorter,  
ever,

the air thinner and thinner —

until in the bottomless mirror of dreams

they meet for a moment,

melt into one

sparkle —

my heart and my death.

Dust to dust.

Kaks.

Neid on kaks, kellelt küsin,

kelle poole ma kuulatan,

kelle kohtuotsust ma kardan.

Läbi vaikuse liigub pendel,  
läbi tühjuse niriseb liiv –  
üha lähemal. Iga viiv.  
Kahevahel ma kahvatu vaarun  
pooleldi seotud silmil,  
kord ühe,  
kord teise poole  
kaldudes, kadudes.  
Üha vähemaks jääb nende vahe,  
üha selgemaks saab mu selg,  
üha lühemaks sammud,  
üha,  
üha õhemaks õhk –  
kuni une põhjatus peeglis  
saavad nad silmapilguks  
kokku, sulavad üheks  
säraks –  
mu süda ja surm.  
Tuulde pörm.

\*\*\*

Life and sleep — leaves  
from the same tree,  
spaceless book.  
He who reads, lives,  
he who browses, is dreaming.  
Life and sleep — two sisters.  
The third one, the youngest, is death.  
Elu ja uni – lehed  
ühelt ja samalt puult,  
ruumitust raamatust.

Kes loeb järjest, see elab,  
kes lehitseb, see näeb und.  
Elu ja uni - kaks öde.  
Kolmas, noorim, on surm.

\*\*\*

And I love you because  
I love you.  
Why meet —  
you are but air for me.  
Ever present.  
Ja ma armastan Sind, sest  
ma armastan Sind.  
Milleks kohtuda –  
Sa oled minu jaoks õhk.  
Kõikjal kohal.

\*\*\*

Woman is water — clear,  
pure and eternal.  
Men are the spices  
in the century's soup.

Naine on vesi – selge,  
Puhas ja igavene.  
Mehed on maitseained  
sajandi supi sees.

\*\*\*

The future is happening now,  
here –  
in me and in us.

The thought in your head is the seed.

You are the blossom of it.

And tomorrow is ever tomorrow —  
man, full of nuclear music.

Tulevik toimub praegu,

siinsamas –

minus ja meis.

Mõte su peas on seeme.

Sina oled ta õis.

Ja homme on homme on homme –

l'homme, tuumamuusikat täis.

\*\*\*

The letter from clouds to sand:

the shadow is but a while.

On the other side of us

day never dies.

Pilvede kiri liivale:

vari on viiv.

Teiselpool meid

päev on jääv.

*Translated from the Estonian by Doris Kareva and Andres Aule*

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