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## Meelis Friedenthal – Estonia

### *Mesilased (2012)*

The Bees

Publishing House **AS Varrak**

#### Biography

The Estonian writer Meelis Friedenthal (b.1973) has written a doctoral thesis at Tartu University on a 13th century philosophical-theological treatise about seeing and vision. Friedenthal has worked as lecturer in the faculty of theology and history and is currently working as a senior researcher in Tartu University Library.

Friedenthal has earned a reputation as a speculative fiction writer, his first novel *Golden Age* is about the role of history in shaping our identity and won third place in a national novel competition in 2004. The following year, his story 'Nerissa' won an Estonian science fiction prize. He is also a member of the editorial board of the webzine *Algernon*, which publishes science fiction stories, news and articles. Friedenthal has also written an extensive postscript about the historical context of the events described in the novel.

#### Synopsis

Friedenthal describes the adventures of Laurentius Hylas, a student travelling from the University of Leiden to the Academia Gustavo-Carolina in Tartu, Livonia.

Laurentius arrives in Estonia some years before the end of the 17th century, together with his parrot Clodia. The parrot's sanguine temperament is supposed to help counteract the melancholia that affects Laurentius. Tartu has a reputation as a city of muses, but Laurentius sees starving people behind the city gates and feels the dampness of the houses. Thus, his melancholia worsens and he starts to suspect seeing again the ghosts which have haunted him from his childhood onwards.

Everything he eats tastes of mud and putrefaction, and he feels weaker and weaker every day. He tries to find some cure for his disease but only manages to arouse suspicion of witchcraft.

Laurentius hears a professor talking about the medicinal theories of Boyle and follows his advice of bloodletting to cure his condition. Unfortunately, the process does not work and Laurentius faints. In the haze of weakness he sees a girl who has, "eyes like gold, like the dark honey, her breathing like humming". She starts appearing at night and, later, Laurentius begins to discover that strange events are happening around him. He is unsure if it is possible to explain them naturally or supernaturally, as the competing philosophical theories he follows permit both.

## *Mesilased*

### **Meelis Friedenthal**

Kogu aeg sadas vihma. Vihm oli mädandanud saagi põldudel, pannud hallitama majade puust seinad, muutnud vetikaligedaks laevade tekilauad. Laurentius oli juba mitu kuud söönud mädanenud leiba, elanud hallitavates majades ja viimasel nädalal ka libisenud ligedal laevatekil. Must sapp kogunes temasse, nagu jõkke torgatud toki otsa koguneb kõnts. Nüüd astus ta lõpuks kõikuvast paadist sadamakaile, selle põhjamudasse rammitud palkide peale löödud libedatele laudadele ja vaatas kõhklevalt ümbruskonnas ringi. Tuul puhus madalast taevast hoogude kaupa veeprintsmeid näkku ja ta proovis aru saada, milline on see maa, kuhu ta enda vabal valikul oli tulnud. Lage, valge liiva ja üksikute pillirootutidega kaldariba ning ühtlased hallid pilved meenutasid väga seda sadamat, kust ta oli teele asunud. Postilaeva mast paistis samasugusena halli taeva taustal ning palakad, mis nendele olid tõmmatud, paistsid samasugused hallid ja ilmetud nagu siis, kui ta oli teele asunud. Pikalt merre ulatuva silla kõrval oli näha pooleldi porise vee alla mattunud muul ja selle otsas vees kõssitav vana vahimaja, mida ilmselt juba mõnda aega ei olnud keegi kasutanud. Neid majavaresid oli kõikide sadamate juures ning vaatamata oma armetusele sisendas selline pilt Laurentiusele miskipärast hoopis kindlust. Siingi oli sadamaid ümber ehitatud, siingi laiendati uute laevade tarbeks, vanad vahimajad jäeti maha.

Ta ohkas ja kohendas närviliselt veest tilkuvat katet puuri peal.

Oma varustuse kaasavõtmiseks ei pidanud ta kuigi palju pingutama – üks tammelaudadest kokku löödud kast mahutas täielikult selle, mida ta oli pidanud vajalikuks kooli kaasa võtta. See läks koos laeva trümmis veetava kaubaga tolli ning ilmselt võis selle alles täna õhtul kätte saada. Laeva last, ka reisijate isiklik pagas, vaadati hoolikalt üle ning pandi kirja kõik, mis võis vähegi maksu alla käia. Sellega ei olnudki tegelikul muret, tal polnud seal suurt midagi väärtuslikku, kõik tema vähesed isiklikud raamatud olid ka ametlikult lubatud ja medikamente oli ta kaasa võtnud vaid minimaalselt. Raskusi valmistas hoopis puur kaeluspapagoiga. Juba kodus oldi teda hoiatatud, et linnu transportimine ei pruugi kõige lihtsam olla, ning olud, mida ta siit eest leiab, võivad sellele saatuslikuks saada. Samas ei tahtnud ta kuidagi oma seltsilisest loobuda ja otsustas pigem riskida. Praeguseks oli kõige suurem mure saada lind võimalikult kähku külma vihma käest kuhugi soojemasse kohta.

Laurentius pühkis laiaäärsest kübarast hoolimata silmadesse valgunud vihmavee ära, heitis mantlihõlma alt pilgu taskukellale ja jäi otsima kedagi, kes võiks teda mingi trahteri juurde juhatada ja võib-olla hiljem ka kasti tollist ära tuua. Puuri ei julgenud ta kellelegi teisele usaldada. Tegutseda tuli kiiresti, sest teed olid juba praegu üsna viletsad ning ta ei tahtnud mingil tingimusel kauem oodata, et siit linnast edasi sõita. Sügisised, järjest tihedamaks ja rajumaks muutuvad vihmajad uuristasid niigi pehmeid radu ja iga päevaga muutus nende läbimine vaevalisemaks. Õhk tõmbus aeglaselt jäiseks. Papagoi võis külma saada. Tuli kohe leida mingi vanker või tõld, mis Tartu poole minema hakkaks.

«Hei!»

Vihmast ligedal sadamakail olid vaid mõned üksikud uudishimulikud, kes olid vastikust ilmast hoolimata tulnud saabuvaid paate vaatama. Nad teadsid ilmselt väga hästi, et erilist lootust tööd leida neil ei olnud, ning ei osanud seega Laurentiuse hüüde peale kohe reageeridagi. Kogu lasti ladusid tollimaja juures maha meremehed ja tüdinud hooletusega askeldasid kaupmeeste palgatud laadijad, kes libedaid kaste ja niiskunud kotte kärudele vinnasid. Ametnikud märkisid kaupu üles.

Laurentius hõikas veel kord.

«Hei, sina seal!»

Kui hõreda ja kulunud kuuega uudistaja tuimalt üles vaatas, viipas Laurentius talle kutsuvalt käega juhuks, kui teine tema keelest aru ei peaks saama. Mees ise nägi välja nagu tege lane ajaloo keskmise perioodi süngete kunstnike maalidel, mida ta oli Hollandis näinud: loperguseks vajunud viltkübara alt ulatusid salkudena välja ebamäärast värvi juuksed, nina oli muhklik ja punetas, harva habemetüüka alt aimus haigusarmiline lõug. Laurentiusel oli tunne, et mehe kaela oleks sobinud suurepäraselt silt «Nurjatus». Kõikides sadamates luusisid sellised ringi ning enamasti oli nende välimuse põhjal tehtud instinktiivne otsus õige. Samas olid need tege lased alati ka kõige paremini linna kõrtside ja võõrastemajade olukordadega kursis, ja nii võis neist ka palju kasu olla. Petsid nad muidugi alati, küsimus oli vaid selles, kas said rohkem või vähem petta.

«Juhata mind korralikku kõrtsi,» teatas Laurentius lühidalt ja vaatas, kuidas mees sõna lausumata minekule pöördus. Loo detavasti sai ta siiski keelest aru – või siis aimas.

Laurentius tõstis ettevaatlikult papagoipuuri sülle ja hakkas mehe järel linna poole liikuma. Lind kriiksatas ärevalt.

«Tss, Clodia, ole tasa.»

Nad kõndisid järjest tihenevas hämaruses edasi ja Laurentius püüdis võimalikult vähe puuri kõigutada. Öhtuse taeva taustal joonistusid ähvardavana välja toekatest kividest laotud sirged ja paksud linnamüürid, ümarad keskaegsed kindlustornid ja neli kõrget kirikut, madalamad majad neelas endasse pilvedest imbuv nätske hämu. Mees tema ees kõndis ootamatult kebjal sammul ja näis väga hästi teadvat, kuhu ta kavatseb välja jõuda. Temal endal seevastu hakkas vana haigus üha tugevamalt ja tugevamalt välja lööma. Praegune lakkamatu, kõigesse imbuv ja turrutav niiskus mõjus rängemalt kui varasematel aastatel. Sisikonnas kääriva musta sapi üleküllus muutis ta keha tavaliselt alles hilissügiseks jõuetuks ja unetuks, kuid sellel suvel algasid vihmad juba jaanipäeva paiku ning see lõppematu sabin oli tema sisikonna, südame ja aju kleepuvasse udusse mähkinud. Nüüd laevalt maa peale asudes ja lamedatel läikimahõõrutud kivilidel kõndides tekitas mere kõikumise mälestus sellele lisaks veel tunde, nagu peaks ta soost läbi pressima. Iga samm oli pingutus.

«Eh,» ühmas ta omaette. «Veel veidi.»

Ta vaatas ees kõndiva kaltsaka kookus selga ja mõtles, et ilmselt peab ikka kellegi teise oma kastile järele saatma. Nii viisi sadamast leitud juhuslike tegelastega võis sageli mingi jama tekkida. Tõenäoliselt oskab kõrtsmik aidata. Ta püüdis meelde tuletada, millised on Tallinna vääringud, mille kohta olid talle laeva peal erinevad reisijad nõu andnud ja millest ta juba siis järeldas, et täit selgust siin ilmselt kätte ei saa. Ars apodemica's, reisimise kunstist rääkivates raamatutes, ei puudutatud Eesti- ja Liivimaa olusid peaaegu üldse – seal olid pigem üldised juhtnöörid, mida tähele panna ja kuidas arukalt ümbrust jälgida. Siinsed linnad ja maad olid apodeemiliselt

täiesti kirjeldamata – huvi pärast reisitakse ikkagi ju mujal, lõunas. Kultuuri ja ajalooa paikades. Ta ei suutnud midagi asjalikku meelde tuletada. Pea oli paks.

«Olgu,» otsustas Laurentius lõpuks. «Kuuendikust öörist peaks igal juhul piisama.»

Peaaegu kottpipmedas peatusid nad lõpuks kollase laterna all, mis valgustas ootamatult viisaka väljanägemisega kõrtsi, mis asus vaid veidi maad enne linnaväraid, ja mees sirutas käe pikale. Laurentius poetas sinna juba salaja taskust välja otsitud väikese mündi ja lõi pilgu maha. Mees tunnistas hetke talle antud raha ja naeratas siis laialt.

«Pagan,» mõtles Laurentius. «Ikka andsin liiga palju.»

Ta tiris puuri uksest sisse.

«Kas ta soovib veel midagi?» uuris kaltsakas ootamatult heas saksa keeles.

Laurentius kõhkles. Kõige parema meelega oleks ta näinud, et mees kiiresti minekut teeb, sest need, kes end ise sulle külge kleebivad, on tavaliselt erilised kaabakad.

«Mul on vaja Tartu poole minna,» ütles ta siis eneselegi ootamatult. «Ja võimalikult kähku.»

Kasti järgi saadab ta siiski kellegi teise, aga tee uurimises ei olnud ju midagi halba. Mingisugusel hetkel pidid neil siin käima voorimehetõllad ja laevas teati rääkida, et pea iga nädal pidi mõni seltskond Tartu poole minema. Talle oldi kaardi pealt isegi kahte võimalikku teed näidatud – mõlemad võtsid mõni päev aega, olenevalt teeoludest võis ka kauem minna.

Mees heitis veel kord pilgu papagoipuurile ning lahkus siis – Laurentiusele tundus, et pilkliku kummardusega.

Ta kehtas õlgu, tõstis puuri kaminale kõige lähema laua peale, tõmbas tumeda niiskunud riidepalaka sealt ära ja vaatas, kuidas papagoi end õrrel kohendas.

«Noh, Clodia, oled valmis veel üheks reisiks?»

Koldest tulvav soojus mõjus ergutavalt ja ravis tema meeleolu ja papagoi külmetavat keha. Võtnud taskust paberi seest mõned seemned, puistas ta need puuri põhja. Polnud kindel, et siin kandis võis kusagilt päevalilloseemneid leida, ning seega oli ta neid ise kaasa võtnud. Nagu tavaliselt kogunesid muidu ruumis tegevusetult seisnud inimesed kohe puuri ümber, kes kõik tahtsid imelikku värvilist lindu näha.

«Kust selline ka pärit on?»

«Mida ta sööb?»

«Kas ta laulab ka?»

Laurentius seletas. Ühest küljest oli muidugi papagoi kaasatassimine tülikas ja ebamugav – ja mitte vaid Laurentiusele endale, arvatavasti kannatas lind selle käes isegi rohkem –, kuid teiselt poolt aitas see suurepäraselt inimestega kontakti luua ning Clodia oli talle juba laevas suureks abiks olnud.

«Olete üliõpilane, jah?» küsis keegi laua tagant tõustes.

«Jah,» vastas Laurentius. Tundus, et mees oli teda juba mõnda aega silmitsenud – ta tajus selliseid asju väga täpselt ning oskas pilku maas hoida, et mitte kogemata mõnele juhuslikule uudishimulikule otsa vaadata. Juba noorukina oli ta aru saanud, et sellest tulevad pahandused. Alguses hakkavad inimesed kahtlustama, pärast hoiavad temaga rääkides sõrmi selja taga ristas, pööravad tänavanurgalt tagasi ja väldivad hoopiski. Kõige kindlam on pilku maas hoida.

«Mina ei soovitaks teil Tartusse praegu minna.»

Mehe pindmise viisakuse tagant õhkus irooniat ning ka tema teietamine oli kuidagi pilklik.

«Miks siis?» üritas Laurentius vastu vaielda. Tegelikult ta muidugi teadis, milliseid vastuväiteid võiks Tartusse minemisele tuua.

«Halvad ajad. Ka professorid võtavad oma ülesandeid praegu väga laisalt. Suvi oli vihmane, nälg on vältimatu, kõik hinnad lähevad üles.»

«See on igal pool nii.»



## *The Bees*

**Meelis Friedenthal**

*Translated from the Estonian by Adam Cullen*

It rained all the time. Rain had rotted the crops on the fields, had covered the wooden walls of the buildings with mold, had made ships' deck boards as sopping as seaweed. For already several months' time, Laurentius had been eating rotten bread, had been living in mildewed buildings, and in the last week, had also been sliding across the soggy deck of a ship. Black bile collected within him like sludge atop a stake driven into a riverbed. Now, he finally stepped from the lurching boat onto the harbor dock, onto the slippery boards nailed onto logs that were rammed into the mud beneath the water, and peered hesitatingly at his surroundings. The wind flung drizzle into his face in bursts from the low sky, and he strove to understand what sort of land it was, to which he had arrived by his own free choice. The bare, white sand and lone patches of reeds along the strip of shore, as well as the identical gray clouds very much resembled the harbor, from which he had set off. The mast of the post ship looked just the same against the gray sky, and the sheets that had been raised on it appeared just as gray and featureless as they had when he cast off. Next to the pier, which extended far out into the sea, a jetty buried halfway beneath the muddy water could be seen, and on top of it was an old watchman's house crouched down in the water, which no one had apparently used for already quite some time. These ruins could be found in every harbor, and despite their pitiful appearance, such an image rather instilled a sense of confidence in Laurentius for some reason.

Here as well, the harbors had been rebuilt; here as well, they had been enlarged for new ships to dock, and the old watchmen's houses had been abandoned.

He sighed, and nervously adjusted the cover over the cage dripping with rainwater.

He had not been required to make all that much of an effort in bringing his paraphernalia along—one chest hammered together from oak planks fit what he had deemed necessary for bringing with him to school entirely. It was sent to customs together with the goods carried in the ship's hold, and he would apparently only receive it that evening. The ship's cargo—even its passengers' personal baggage—was looked through carefully, and anything at all that could be subject to a tax was written down. There was actually no real worry about that—Laurentius had nothing of great value in the chest; every one of his few personal books was also officially permitted, and he had taken along only the bare minimum of medicines. What posed a difficulty was actually the cage containing a rose-ringed parakeet. Already when he was back at home, he had been warned that transporting a bird might not be the easiest thing, and the conditions that he would find before him could be fateful for the animal. At the same time, he did not want to give up his companion in the very least, and decided to take the risk instead. As of now, his greatest worry was getting the bird out of the cold rain and into a warmer place somewhere as quickly as possible.

Laurentius wiped away the rainwater that trickled down into his eyes despite the wide-brimmed hat he wore, glimpsed at a pocket watch beneath the hem of his coat, and started looking for someone who could direct him towards some pub, and maybe also retrieve his chest from customs later. He did not

dare entrust the cage to anyone else. He had to act quickly, because the roads were already rather abysmal, and under no condition did he want to wait any longer to travel on from this town. The fall showers, which were becoming ever thicker and more furious, made furrows in the already soft paths, and traversing them became more toilsome with each passing day. The air slowly turned icy. The parakeet might freeze. He needed to find a wagon or a coach that would start making its way towards Tartu.

“Hey!”

Only a few lone, curious individuals who had come to watch the arriving boats in spite of the nasty weather stood upon the dock, which was slippery from rain. They were apparently very well aware that there was no great hope in finding work, and were thus unable to react to Laurentius’ cry right away. The entirety of the cargo was being unloaded at the customs house by the sailors, and the haulers hired by merchants bustled around with wearied carelessness, heaving the sopping crates and moist sacks onto carts. Officials were marking down the goods. Laurentius called out a second time.

“Hey, you there!”

When one onlooker wearing a threadbare, worn coat glanced up expressionlessly, Laurentius beckoned in case the man did not speak his language. The individual himself resembled a figure in the somber paintings of artists from the Middle Ages, which Laurentius had seen in Holland: hair of an indeterminate shade poked out in clumps from beneath his lop-sided felt hat, his nose was knobbed and reddish, and a chin scarred from sickness could be detected beneath his sparse stump of beard. Laurentius had the feeling that a sign reading “Wickedness” would hang wonderfully around his neck. This

type of person could be found drifting around all harbors, and the instinctive decision made on the basis of their appearance was, for the most part, correct. At the same time, these characters were always the most familiar with the situations in the town's pubs and boarding houses; thus, they could be of great use as well. They would always deceive you, of course—the question was merely whether you were deceived to a greater or a less extent.

“Direct me to a proper pub,” Laurentius stated curtly, and watched as the man turned to leave without saying a word. Hopefully, he spoke the language all the same; or else he surmised its meaning.

Laurentius picked up the parakeet cage, cradling it carefully in his arms, and started following the man into town. The bird screeched anxiously.

“Shh, Clodia, be quiet.”

They walked on in the progressively thickening dusk, and Laurentius strove to rock the cage as little as possible. The straight and sturdy town walls stacked from robust stones, the round, medieval defense towers, and the four lofty churches cast a threatening silhouette upon the evening sky, while the lower buildings were swallowed up by a dank murk, soaking from the clouds. The man walked in front of him at an unexpectedly brisk pace, and appeared to be very well aware of the destination that he planned to reach. Laurentius himself, on the contrary, began to suffer from stronger and stronger waves of his old illness. The current, ceaseless, all-penetrating and all-waterlogging dampness affected him more harshly than it had in earlier years. The excess of black bile fermenting in his innards usually made his body feeble and sleepless only by late fall, but that year, the rains had already begun around

midsummer, and the endless drizzle wrapped his intestines, heart, and brain in a viscous fog. Now, having disembarked the boat and walking upon the flat stones worn to a shine, the memory of rocking at sea further added to it a feeling, as if he had to press his way forward through a swamp. Every step was an exertion.

“Eh,” he said under his breath, “just a little further.”

He kept his eyes on the crooked back of the vagabond walking before him, and pondered that he should probably send someone else to fetch his chest all the same. Some sort of a mess could often arise with the chance characters found at a harbor. The barkeep would likely be able to assist him. He strove to remember what kind of currency Tallinn dealt in: he had inquired about this from various passengers back on the ship, and had concluded that he apparently would not achieve full clarity in the question. *Ars apodemica*, books that spoke of the art of travel, almost did not touch upon the conditions in Estonia and Livonia at all—rather, they contained general tips on what to pay attention to, and how to intelligently observe one’s surroundings. The towns and lands here had not been apodemically described at all—people naturally traveled elsewhere out of interest; southward. To places with culture and history. He was unable to recall anything practical from it. His head felt thick.

“Fine,” Laurentius ultimately decided. “A sixth of an *ör* should be enough, in any case.”

Finally, in the nearly pitch-black night, they halted under a yellow lantern illuminating a pub with an unexpectedly decent appearance, located just a slight distance before the city gates. The man stretched out his palm.

Laurentius slipped the small coin into it, which he had already secretly searched out of his pocket, and cast his eyes away. For a moment, the man studied the money that he had been given, and then smiled broadly.

“Curses,” Laurentius thought to himself. “I still gave him too much.”

He lugged the cage in through the door.

“Would he like anything else?” the vagabond inquired in unexpectedly good German.

Laurentius was taken aback. He would have been gladdest to see the man quickly making his way back, because those, who glue themselves to you on their own, are oftentimes especially great scoundrels.

“I need to go towards Tartu,” he then spoke, even surprising himself. “And as quickly as possible.”

He would still send someone else for his chest, but there was nothing wrong in having him look into the journey. Haulers’ carriages had to stop by here at some point, and the other ship passengers had said that one group or another was supposed to embark in the direction of Tartu nearly every week. They had even pointed out two possible routes to him on a map—both took a few days’ time, but could also take longer, depending on the road conditions.

The man cast a glance at the cage one more time, and then left—with a mocking bow, it seemed to Laurentius.

He shrugged, lifted the cage onto the table closest to the fireplace, pulled the dark, damp piece of fabric off of it, and watched the parakeet adjust itself on its perch.

“Well, Clodia—are you ready for one more trip?”

The warmth that cascaded out from under the mantle had a stimulating effect, and healed his mood as well as the parakeet's freezing body. Taking a few seeds out of a piece of folded paper in his pocket, he sprinkled them over the bottom of the cage. He hadn't been certain of whether one could find sunflower seeds anywhere in these parts, and had therefore taken some along himself. As usual, the patrons, who were standing around the room and had nothing to do otherwise, immediately gathered around the cage, each wanting to see the strange, colorful bird.

"Where's that'n from, ey?"

"What's it eat?"

"Does he sing, too?"

Laurentius explained. On the one hand, hauling a parakeet around with him was naturally inconvenient and a bother (and not only for Laurentius himself—the bird presumably suffered from it even more than he), but on the other, it was a fantastic means for helping him make contact with people, and Clodia had already been of great aid to him on the ship.

"You're a university student, yeah?" someone asked, rising from a table.

"Yes," Laurentius replied. It seemed that the man had been eyeing him for already some time—he had a very sharp sense for such things, and knew to keep his eyes on the ground in order to not accidentally look directly at some random, curious observer. Already as a young boy, he had realized that trouble could come from it. At first, people grow suspicious, and afterward, they make a cross with their fingers behind their backs when talking to him, turn around from the street corner, and avoid him entirely. The surest way to go about things was to keep his eyes on the ground.

“I wouldn’t recommend you going to Tartu right now.”

Irony radiated from behind the man’s superficial politeness, and even his respectful manner of addressing Laurentius was somehow mocking.

“Why is that?” Laurentius tried to argue. In reality, of course, he knew the kinds of objections that could be made against going to Tartu.

“Bad times. Even the professors are taking their tasks very lazily at the moment. The summer was rainy, famine is unavoidable, all of the prices are going up.”

“That’s how it is everywhere.”





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**Meelis Friedenthal** – Estonia

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