

Biography: Margarita Perveņeckā (1976) is a Latvian playwright and writer. In 2001, Perveņeckā graduated from the Latvian Academy of Culture with a BA in film and theater, and since then has been publishing her writing, working for various creative platforms, and writing screenplays. Her first collection, *All the Trees Have Gone*, was published in 2006. Perveņeckā has written several plays for theaters in Latvia. Her writing stands out with her unusual ways of perceiving the world, her use of scientific terms, internationalisms, neologisms, and other peculiar and poetic means of expression. Her novel *Getano's Krematos* received the 2011 Annual Latvian Literature Award.

Synopsis: The common theme throughout this short-story collection is the life stories of people who used to be (or still are) children. They all need to decide how they should approach life. Do they do it alone, or alongside someone else? Which is more important, their calling and the quests it requires (either inspired or clouded by childish imagination), or actual social relationships? The collection's protagonists try to make sense of themselves and the world around them and try to find their place in it and master the rules of life. Yet the key to achieving this is always missing—a result of their childish selfishness.

Excerpt

Forgive me, Madame President!

[...]

Already at 4 in the morning, the alarm went off playing "We are mighty!" After the national anthem was done, Lote got to work. She had to weave a school flag with Madame President's face on it, all over again from the beginning, because the little ones had

unravelling the first one she had made, then she had to set up the lectern, and also see to her own appearance. All of that – before and after school – from 4 in the morning until 2 at night. School was in between –

The students had to bring a condom and a cucumber or banana to health education class. The teacher stood in front of the class and showed how to correctly put on a condom and everyone else had to follow along and do it themselves. The students giggled, whispered, blushed, and sweated. Lote didn't have a condom, she couldn't buy one, let alone tear open its packaging, and take out the mucousy rubbery blob inside. Lote spent the whole hour staring aloofly at the wall behind the teacher's back. The teacher asked Lote about other types of contraception, Lote said she didn't use any and that the best protection was "not to do it at all". She almost began to recite the point from her father's speech about 10-child families in a legal marriage, but she was interrupted by a roar of laughter from her classmates who then froze almost instantly in a tense, aroused silence at the sight of the teacher producing vaginal suppositories and a syringe filled with crème. Lote remained quietly presidential, feeling she was above such trivial, sloppy, adolescent foolishness, while she repeated the articles of the Constitution to herself.

On Friday, Lote had a field trip planned. It was to be a very sombre and pious affair. Alģis wrote a note for her again and Lote took the train. This was yet another one of the countless officially recognised national days of mourning, but with the one notable difference that on this particular day the president would lay flowers at the Freedom

Monument. She would also lay flowers there on other solemn occasions or during official visits of other national leaders, but Lote had never been there on one of these occasions. Lote had NEVER seen the president in the flesh. Lote bought a memorial wreath in the Central Market and headed towards the monument square. There was still a half hour left until the solemn moment, but a dark hive of mourners and police was already swarming around there. Lote tried to squeeze through the crowd, but the first five rows were cordoned off and she sure wasn't the only one who wanted to see and touch, or at least just see the president. The crowd craned, rocked, and choked down their anger in a manner wholly consistent with traditional ethnic culture, they self-flagellated and suffered, and trampled on each other's polished dress shoes. Finally, the redemptive March to purgatory began to play! and everyone lurched, bowed their heads, because no one wanted to be the first to go to purgatory. Lote stood on her toes, but couldn't see anything. The queen, that is, the president, approached the monument down the red carpet, she stood at its base and the moment of silence began. Then she laid her wreath and the national anthem began to play. After the anthem, the crowd slowly began to shuffle past the monument, so they could also place their wreaths at its base. Lote didn't dare move a muscle before all of it – the march, the moment of silence, the anthem – was over, but finally the moment had come for her to try to force her way to the front of the crowd. She shoved with her elbows, pushed with her hips, poked the other attendees in their sensitive spots with her spruce wreath. Behind her there were indignant hisses, huffs, miffs, and "what an ill-bred brat! dishonouring this sacred moment!" Lote felt like she would be torn to pieces any second, her only hope was to push to the front and see HER! Suddenly, someone shoved Lote very

hard and she fell onto the red carpet right on top of her wreath. 150 m away, in front of her she could see the back of the president's ankles – already treading away – a coat above them. Tears streamed down Lote's face, she kissed the red carpet, and remained lying there on her face. Finally, an old man grabbed her by the elbow and helped her get up. The two of them, tears in their eyes, placed their wreaths next to each other and stood there for a moment watching their wreaths support each other. Afterward they each stared down at their shoes. The man saw how Lote's shoes slowly turned and stepped away. He lifted his gaze to meet Lote's face and studied it for a long time. He hadn't seen such a young face so close up in so long. Lote also looked at him with a bit of surprise, how the man's face, even if old, still had such a healthy glow and was so smooth, it was almost like a youth standing in a rye field was staring back at her. She saw the August sun, the sea of rye, a shoreline of smooth skin... dressed in this overcoat and scarf, dew drops in his eyes. Why had this overcoat of senescence grown onto his flesh, if only he could take it off and stand there young and strong in a linen shirt holding a scythe in his hand with this young girl at his side bringing him a bowl of barley porridge with little bits of potato and fresh, thick buttermilk... but just at that moment a shrieking steel bird dropped its deathly clutch of eggs onto his field cutting off his youth then and there. Lote wanted to move 70 years into the future, she wanted to pass over all those struggles for the best grades, passing entry exams and final exams, looking for a job and an apartment, having a family, and fending off destructive lustful relationships. She wanted to walk slowly examining everything from the side without giving into temptation. The man watched from the side and saw life passing him by, without his participation. He slowly, gently took Lote's hand and the two of them walked just as

slowly to the park. All of the benches and arbours were blanketed with raven-clad mourners, and they both revelled in each other's memories, weighed and measured who had suffered more, endured more. Lote and the old man passed through them like dusty cobwebs and walked to the park along the canal. After three hours spent walking and sitting, the man took Lote to a café. While Lote stood in line at the WC waiting for the toilet, the man had already arranged coffees and dishes with berry candies and whipped cream. The man motioned with a glance for her to sample the modest feast, Lote returned a thanks with a similar glance and took a seat. Lote was famished and she quickly ate all of it. The man slowly sucked on a candy and licked the whipped cream in small strips to prolong his enjoyment. He poured out the contents of his wallet onto the table for Lote to take something else for herself. Lote refused. There was a pile of change and 2 lats on the table. The man got up and brought her two cabbage pasties and a cookie. Lote wanted to throw her arms around his neck and kiss him all over his face. The man sensed what she was feeling and smiled wistfully. It was all within arm's reach, and yet the lifetime that separated them made it unreachable. A second cup of coffee. Lote tossed in 50 santīms for it. They spent an hour and a half drinking it. Nobody was waiting for the man at home, he didn't have anybody. No worries, Alģis was engaged in his civic reproduction plan with others in some other city.

They came out of the café and walked a block to the intersection. The man pointed at the windows on the third floor and spoke for the first time in a youthful voice.

That's where I live. Where should I take you?

Lote didn't want to leave him and be alone again. Would she really end up alone? Instead Lote wanted to be with this man in life and accompany him, hopefully not that soon, into death. Maybe in a year she would have aged quickly enough to reach this man's station on life's journey, they would step out of their discriminatory bodies and pass through those windows together.

To the station.

There are stations where if you get on the right train, you end up home. Alone. Lote wanted to stay somewhere around here with this man.

Lote got on the train. The man was still standing on the platform and a free room opened up in his chest. It was for Lote. In six years his chest would rot and crumble underground and who knows where Lote's home would be then. The train rushed into the darkness and it seemed to Lote that she too was herself moving through the dark, in some unknown direction, who knows where and why. In a few years, while sitting in a parliamentary meeting, she would remember the unconscious sense that this day had been the only real moment in her entire life, and that everything up to that point and after... so strange and...

"We are mighty!" Lote woke up at the loom again and by the time she had to leave for school, the new school flag was ready – the president with the beatific smile of a Madonna together with the words broadcast by Lote's alarm clock. A poster appeared on the school's bulletin board announcing the presentation and blessing of the school flag in anticipation of the approach of Independence Day.

Tonight after class she would have to listen to her anthology of the president's speeches, summarise them, extract their key points, and present them to the JP NVO RV board for discussion.

Lote leafed through the catalogue of the president's outfits, which she had assembled based on a year and a half of her own observations and collected documents. Lote chose a cream-coloured outfit and spent all of Sunday running between 8 different fabric stores until she found what she was looking for. Her aunt had already drawn the cut-out and was waiting by the sewing machine. The day after tomorrow she still had to get to the hairdresser's.

The students were already gathering in the auditorium. Not because they were interested, but because they were released from their classes. And, even better – bacon buns and apple juice were being passed out. The sound of chewing was soon overpowered by the school choir, which sang 3 folk songs. Aļģis filmed everything. After the songs, a short film Aļģis had put together was screened. The film showed turning points in the nation's history: an occupation, attempts at assimilation, the declaration of the nation's independence, another occupation, war, repressions, deportations, the Communist victory, perestroika, the coup, regaining independence, the barricades, victory, joining the EU and NATO, and at the end of it all – the Song Festival. In the final scene, just for a moment seemingly as if by accident, there was a shot of all of Aļģis's large family sitting at a 100 m long table in front of which were three buckets of cottage cheese, but on top of which there were three mountains of rye bread, each about 30 kg so that only their faces were just barely visible, and not even all of those. Then there was a moment of silence and darkness and onto the stage walked...the

president... that is, Lote. She was dressed in an outfit usually worn by experienced, practical, and exquisitely groomed women of a certain age with a hairstyle matching their years and social standing – a short cut, in a reddish hue, styled and blow-dried for more volume. And, of course, a brooch. A skirt down to her knees and pumps. Occasional laughter and loud whispers could be heard in the audience.

"Greetings, dear colleagues, teachers, ladies and gentlemen. I'm delighted to see that there are so many of you here. And, it seems to me, you are all in good spirits. Today is an important day for your school, that is, for our school. Just as a person receives their birth certificate and later their passport, so too a school must have its own identity affirmed. This is because a school is the first serious place where a person is socialised – they enter it as a child, but leave it as an adult. And the most significant instrument, which imparts knowledge to a person and helps the development of their personality is the cooperation between students and teachers directed toward a single goal: self-discovery and selecting one's profession. That profession will shape that individual's path and be the field they will till throughout their life. This means that if everyone in this auditorium today – and that includes myself – keeps their mind in a state of purity and clarity, then all of us will live with a bright vision of our future, we will believe in ourselves, but also wish others good luck and success. If we do that, our minds and our labours will be able to come together and shine like a bright beacon beyond our borders, so that no one will ever think to call us a small country or an endangered nation. There have been many difficult moments and mistakes in our history, but we must learn from that experience, analyse it, and turn it to our benefit, instead of constantly whining and complaining about how much we have suffered, because

walking around in that kind of state, downcast and depressed, we will never plough this land, nor plant strong and healthy seeds, and we will never see the sun. Our homeland is only as great as the people who live and work there. This means that each individual's task and responsibility is to become a great person – a person with their own name, honour, belief, accomplishments, and unshakeable faith and strength, so that we can climb together up the steps to the sun. And if someone asks us for our help, we will help them, but if others don't ask for that help, then we must step over them, because the only thing that can stand in our own way are our own doubts. This lesson is like the bread that sustains us and our parents and then our school are the first to give it to us, but in time we must learn to start making it on our own. And today we will give this bakery a name, may god bless it, we will give it a face and a passport. The school flag!

The RV members solemnly brought out a 2x2.5m flag into the auditorium. At first, a few giggles and cackles rose from the audience, but this was quickly followed by an air of astonishment, which descended over it. The national anthem was smeared across the flag like a thick pat of butter on a slice of bread when everyone rose with their mouths agape to sing it. Lote and her companions began, the choir and all of the ensembles joined in, finally the walls began to vibrate from the voices of the audience. Alģis lifted his camera – the sign of the thunder-cross appeared on the ceiling. It was the end of the cassette.

The flag was brought out into the school courtyard and raised up the staff, at the top of which was a triangular roof-like covering like on a roadside crucifix. The teachers placed flowers at its base. In the auditorium, the members of JP NVO RV sat at their table and handed out information on membership requirements, member responsibilities, and trips

abroad. Aļģis organised a cinema group and announced a competition for the best screenplay based on the themes in his programme booklet. The prize – a one-year subscription to *Forum Cinemas* and an inflatable corn bag with gluewater or specwater for mending the 12 holes in the intestinal glove. The best screenplay could also lay claim to a "sim gra pa la" scale, snout-stuffable rubber boots (if you eat too much you can get out of having to wash; you can go mushroom-picking in the rain, or engage in other aquaphobic activities; dissolve with disulphide monobenzoate (look for it at scola), though with rubber boots, especially neon citrus teddy bears or ultramarine ponies, you can also use benja.) There were only 5 months left until the parliamentary elections.

Lote was standing by the front door of the school. Many of the students were relieved to dive into their after school activities. At times, the door would swing open only a few centimetres from her face – many of the students would just kick the door open with their feet. One of them looked back at Lote, sneered and said loudly to his friend who had kicked open the door: "What are you stupid? You almost broke off the prespissdent's nose! preswizzdent!" bending over with laughter they knocked off through the gates. I. also headed off with some pretty girl.

Bravo, Madame President.

I visited the drama studio and really appreciated your... all of your performance today.

They left and another little group came out.

Oh, you were great, just great. And don't listen to those... mental plebeians. I liked it. Me too.

It was inspiring.

Lote stood there, watching and listening to something off in the distance. She was like the sky standing magnanimously above any childish attitudes and smiling. She was peace, strength, and confidence. Her regal outfit hugged her body tightly, she had her hair pin and her shield against every sling and arrow – her brooch against the evil eye, a round silver sun symbol imbued with magical qualities. She was a high priestess. She could blaze a trail and illuminate it for others, because she was standing on the mountaintop and could see the true nature of things. And she held her people, protected and led them as if they were her most precious brothers and sisters through the shards and ruins of a fallen world to the vessel, which would take them across the star-speckled ocean to spiritual abundance, love, and the eternal freedom of choosing one's own path in life. That's what she felt like just at that moment... Because that's what she was like. It was as if her body had become transparent and her whole essence had transcended and ascended.

Still floating on her sacred orgasm, the school principal brought Lote into the teachers' break room. Aļģis and Lote's two sisters – Skraidīte and Srāmīte (check the spelling in the calendar) had organised a solemn reception. The physics teacher thanked her on behalf of all the teachers for her work in the proper patriotic education of the student body, handed her a basket of flowers, and a heavy tome entitled "The Vidzeme Potter's Trade". A formula which included a ritual changing of clothing, mimicry, meditation, and repetition of a particular linguistic code had fused Lote so completely with the president's personality and her manner of speaking, that Lote seemed to vanish and instead her object of worship seemed to emanate from her body. The teachers were also proof of this, as they behaved towards Lote with increased deference and were already beginning to ask Madame

President about her views on national affairs. The president first thanked everyone for their support and then began to study the flag, How very interesting. I'm delighted that our traditional crafts are still alive and are being taken up by young people. But to name the school in my honour is, in my opinion, a little too much, too soon. How wonderful it would be if one of your own students went on to live a life that made you proud and then you could name the school in their honour.

When will our salaries be increased?

That question can't be easily answered, of course. In general, this is a complicated matter related to an increase in the prosperity of the entire nation. But on an individual level, a person always must decide for themselves whether they are ready to take on a calling, which undoubtedly is the nature of a teacher's vocation, and also be prepared for the difficulties, financial as well as social, which that proposition entails, or if instead, regardless of whether or not they like the job, they preferred to earn more money, so that they can enjoy the finer things in life. Unfortunately, this is a difficult and weighty decision and a person must work to find a compromise, which is by no means impossible.

The teachers looked glum and seemed to sink into their own thoughts. It was clear that there was a person sitting before them who had succeeded in doing this – they had a family, had followed their calling to a career in science, and now they were a charismatic voice leading society to fulfil its calling. The teachers wondered when they had lost their authority, their standards, their faith and strength, had they betrayed their own hopes and dreams, where had they gone wrong. Aļģis replaced this melancholy by moving on to something else:

What is Madame President's opinion on our painful legionnaire question?

You see, we must find clarity on this question as soon as possible and once and for all. Yes, our history has been complicated, but the fact that we ourselves don't thoroughly understand it and are unable to explain it to students in our schools is now used by various, generally trivial, political movements largely oriented towards extremism and incitement of hatred, and other individual malcontents. And as a result accurate information is twisted and our nation is maligned. And when I travel abroad to meet world leaders I have to repeatedly clarify this point and explain away these international misunderstandings much like, if you'll forgive me, awkwardly placed trousers hung up to dry. Just as everyone has had misfortunes in their lives where they were forced to act without hesitation, seeing that as their only chance for survival and being forced to choose between the lesser of two evils – though actually in a situation where, in fact, good and evil were indistinguishable – so too history has such moments, as individuals, after all, are the ones that create history. But there are also tragedies which afflict nations and individuals that one doesn't need to share openly, but instead, no matter how painful it is, must suffer privately. The legionnaires are and will be remembered and honoured, but we don't have to make a show of it or parade in front of crazed bulls who are only just waiting for us to do that. Even if it was not achieved back then, at least the dream for which they fought for in their hearts – a free nation – has been achieved now.

Aren't you afraid of being on our country's roads?

In what way? You mean because of the aggressive driving style of other drivers? This, in my opinion, is just the result of a catastrophic lack of good upbringing and no respect for human

life. In this regard, I can only say that I feel a profound sense of shame and regret that not only do some of our citizens send others to their deaths, but that unfortunately we also hear disturbing stories from other countries where our drivers, and also our pilots and ship captains! demonstrate an affective driving style and cause serious accidents. You know, aggressiveness is the inability to cope with something and this makes me think that these drivers need some kind of course to boost their self-esteem. Unfortunately, this also is an expression of a certain kind of national indifference.

Well, sadly, that's how it is.

I didn't agree with you on the Iraq War.

You have every right to that opinion.

For just a moment longer they all were seated between two realities. Suddenly something shifted in the air. The deity returned to reality and the teachers to their senses. Appearing self-conscious, they got up to leave. The body, which had acted as a host for the president, now behaved like a spinning top. It went out into the hallway to find its master to receive its next orders. Lote was nowhere to be seen. The body climbed up higher and stopped in the hallway by a window opposite a door.

The physics teacher came to unlock the door. He was a down-to-earth pragmatist who forced his students to calculate the voltage running down tram lines, hated atomic physics, or any kind of physics linked with metaphysics, while quietly calculating the proof of god's non-existence. He hadn't posed a single question to the president and had observed this strange transpersonal phenomenon with interest and scepticism.

Catching sight of this wandering body, he invited it into his laboratory. For a second he didn't know who to call. The body didn't know either and wasn't transmit a signal identifying it as a specific person. The teacher picked up the dead air the body was broadcasting and moved to set up his own station. An unresolved issue in his life was eating away at him. He kept it hidden in his most secret drawer and now he silently retrieved it. It was the suppository. He concealed it in one of his hands. He held a pencil in his other hand, he touched the body and sat it down opposite himself. He looked it in the eyes and quietly wondered what were the physics involved in this emanation. Then, some part of his mind shut off and now he saw the body of a 15-year-old girl sitting in front of him. He muttered something about how bright and mature she was, how amazing it was just that she had jumped from one level of development to another completely skipping the one in between, that her attitude toward life was so serious, that she had a real goal she wanted to reach and was striving for high ideals instead of teenage pop culture icons, which were only a path to degradation, and, of course, that she wanted to be with others who were her equals – adults, people rich with experience, and so on. The teacher made a conscious effort to avoid the president's or Lote's names. The body remembered its driver – the similar attitudes of Lote and the president: Lote wanted to jump right from childhood to adulthood; the president communicated with various highly educated people. The body began to tune into the teacher's programme, it was fusing Lote and the president, and the teacher began to seize control of Lote's body like a pirate. The teacher made her lie down on the floor, which he had just cleaned with some napkins. Then he told her to hug her knees and rock back and forth a bit. Next came the suppository. The body tried to stretch out straight, but its skirt

was sliding down and its suspender-belt was already visible. Preparing for her big night, Lote had spent a long time deciding whether to wear panty-hose or socks, in other words, what would the president wear? And there wasn't anyone, of course, whom she could ask. The body couldn't stay straight, because its back side kept dragging it down. The teacher asked the body to get up and lean against the wall. Now it was straight. The teacher opened up the package containing the vaginal suppository, which, at his age, he had only been able to buy recently for the first time and had never experimented with it. He slipped on the rubber cap he'd gotten at the pharmacy over his middle finger. Touching the girl's leg with a pencil, he told her to spread them wider. Her skirt almost covered her face, the teacher was relieved to see her wearing suspender-belts instead of pantyhose, he pushed aside the edge of the girl's panties, everything was already moist, and he slowly pushed in the suppository with his finger.

All of a sudden the decorative buckle of a shoe smashed into the teacher's head. Lote was there, dismay, shame, and anger were there too. She shoved the teacher away with white-hot rage and burst out of his office. Lote paced a bus for 500 m. It stopped and opened its door, Lote ran past it and took a turn. She ran to the station. She had to wait for 15 minutes. Two hours later she arrived in the capital and started running again. Lote stopped at the flower market. She had run away without her purse, her wallet, her overcoat. And for a moment she stood behind the tent surrounding the stall, watching the seller through a gap in the fabric. A customer came up and the seller lifted several of the bouquets. Lote took advantage of the moment the seller had her back turned and grabbed a basket of lilies, ran across the street, and jumped into a trolleybus.

The flower seller ran after her. The cars barely managed to brake for the seller, and by then the trolleybus was already gone. It travelled for 2 stops and then the conductor made Lote get off. Lote went into the WC of the first *chebureki* stand she saw, but she had no idea how to get it out, so she cleaned herself up, straightened her clothes, and calmed down. Then she went back out onto the street and started walking at a slow but spirited pace to the president's castle.

The guards stopped Lote asking her what talent show she was dressed up for, where was she going, who she was seeing and why, and they carefully examined her flower basket.

Lote said that she wanted to see the president... The guard called the president's office and told them that there was some girl here who wanted to drop off flowers for the president.

She was allowed to pass.

At the president's office the director of the office was waiting for her, and froze for just an instant surprised by Lote's appearance. When he'd collected himself, he said that the president would probably not be able to meet Lote in person, because she was busy and in a half hour the primer minister would be arriving to speak with her. Lote was ready to wait late into the night or until the morning.

Please, please, I need to tell her just one sentence.

You can write it on a slip of paper and I'll give it to her with the flowers.

Lote didn't answer. In the meantime, the director had already handed her a piece of cardstock the size of a postcard in the colours of the national flag. Lote decided that this was an appropriate tray on which to present her... The foul physics teacher had violated the honour of the state and its highest official.

"Please forgive me, Madame President!"

The director's assistant disappeared into the bowels of the castle with the card and basket of flowers. The director was ready to accompany Lote to the exit, telling her that president would get all of it and that she didn't need to worry about a thing, but that she should definitely not come here looking like that. But then the assistant emerged with a framed, autographed 30x50 cm photo of the president. It was for Lote. She held it reverentially, thanked them, and said her farewells. Two stories below, standing in a niche in the stairwell, Lote hugged the frame, put the photo to her forehead, whispered "forgive me forgive me forgive me", and kissed it. One of the the guards was already on his way to see what had happened to the visitor.

Clutching the icon close to her body, Lote was already standing on the train platform.