

Biography: Osvalds Zebris (1975) is a Latvian prose writer and publicist. Zebris’ first book – a collection of short stories, *Freedom in Nets* (2010), brought him instant popularity among readers and won him the 2010 Annual Latvian Literature Award for Best Debut. *In the Shadow of Rooster Hill* (2014) is his third book. His novel, *People of the Wooden House* (2013), was shortlisted for the 2013 Annual Latvian Literature Award 2013. In 2020 Zebris published novel *Māra*.

Synopsis: *Māra* is a novel about a group of sixteen-year olds. It tells of their first encounter with pivotal choices and decisions. Māra, the protagonist, has been close friends with three classmates—Edgar, Paul, and Mārtiņš—since first grade. In high school, she is forced to deal with problems resulting from two new classmates, and with her friends’ betrayal. Then, the long-cherished friendship suddenly shatters. When even her own home isn’t safe anymore, when the old foundations have disappeared but she doesn’t yet have new ones underfoot, Māra ends up making a desperate move. This is a story about courage—about Māra’s journey from self-awareness to her acceptance and manifestation of that awareness.

Excerpt

It’s Christmas time and it’s freezing. I’m standing at the edge of a freshly dug pit near a mound of yellowish sand, which has appeared on the hard, trampled snow. When I’m given the signal, I toss three handfuls of it, the ground is also stiff, almost frozen, and it rattles loudly against the wooden box – down there. Someone coughs, I look back – it’s a grey-haired man without a hat, the tip of his nose is red. He is tall, recognisable, bitter. He’s standing close to me, a trembling drop is hanging from his giant nose. It falls and now it’s gone. Some people are hanging their heads, a woman next to me is sniffing – it’s her chubby sister – Aunt Bauska. Then there’s Edgars, Mārtiņš, and Pauls. Anna. Augusts didn’t

come, he doesn't go anywhere unless there's a good reason. Hats and kerchiefs cover only the women's heads and I have to wonder who taught these men and boys that they have to stand bareheaded in a cemetery? They're not like us. My gaze comes back to the gaping hole in the ground. I pull my hat down lower over my ears, light-coloured grains of sand trickle down my cheeks, I realise my carefree days are being buried here. It will be different now, a metamorphosis, it has been decided.

When the flowers and wreaths have been arranged, when the fat candles have been lit – they make me think of that wonderful night at Anna's – and some have already said their farewells (staring straight into my eyes, of course), it occurs to me for the first time that I'm saying goodbye to her forever. I don't really understand any of it yet, that understanding will come later. I bid farewell to me forever, my fall and ascent up the mountain, which lasted nearly four months, is now over. I fall on the ground with a thud and rattle like the frozen sand against the thin wooden wall separating me from mom. For now, it's still just an empty word, memories will fill it from near and far, until one day, on some hot summer evening, when I pause for a moment in the shadow of the storm-snapped willow, she will be far enough away for me to understand it. A dog barks somewhere in the distance – it's Joe, a stray, saying hello. A brilliant mother-of-pearl button is in my pocket, a cow nods its head in the bare birch branches. All of it has come to pass. Hungry little ravens trace out loops above our heads, Pauls and Edgars help keep me upright, I'm stronger now, finally I can feel the pain.

Māra and fear

I count to ten, but don't make it past four. The inseparable quartet, yeah, that's still our story. It could be our story. I want to tape over this place and time, to wind it forward. But this moment is like a heavy stone, and I'm at the centre of it, frozen. I see, I know, but I can't move.

Tram No. 1 just stopped around the corner, some people get on, others get off, someone's head hits the glass, a loud thud, he jolts awake. He looks around – are we at the market yet? No, the bridge is still to come, just sleep, doze. I see all of them, there, at the end of Bell Street, these happy, contented people whose minds have never been corrupted by the wicked idea of getting on stage, in the light, to show off. An arrogant breed of mountain climbers. Revolting pride, take a hard look, here come the fruits of your labour. All of them rotten to the core.

I'm standing on stage – luckily, in the shadows – the floodlights have caught, captured the two of them in a circle of red-green light. They have moved to the centre of the auditorium, of course, they are on the same level as the audience, emphasising my hopes and the ill-suited nature of speeches delivered from stage for our times. They had prepared music, costumes, dancing, all of it had been rehearsed! Edgars and Mārtiņš are sitting on the edge of the stage, swaying to the rhythm, in time with the two of them.

"Māra, we'd need..."

"No!"

The stone keeping me frozen begins to shift, I come to my senses. There's tall Elīna with her trembling hand, I push her aside and walk down. Three steep steps next to the audience, Laura looks at me, I can feel her staring, pointing at me with her long finger, the audience is muttering and murmuring something about failure, about it being the pinnacle of it all. I'm at the door, I look back. Wide smiles across their faces, thunderous applause for them, there are many filming and taking pictures, no one is murmuring or staring. Because I'm not there. There's nothing to stare at, nothing to mutter about. "I have to take my time, I can't act too fast or I won't get it right," that's probably what my mom and grandmother would say, but I have to take this step on my own.

Māra

Pauls, I'm dying. Shave me!!!!

No answer. I notice the "h", almost laugh out loud about shaving, then correct myself: "Save me, *i mean*". I should run, try to get out of here, jump on a tram, cross the bridge, the river, the whole city, just get out. Find people who don't know anything about any of it. Lots of them. But this time the tram leaves without me, I guess this is what they call feeling like you've turned to stone. Except that it actually feels more like turning into a tree. A stupor. You can lean forward and back, fall on your knees or ass, but can't take a single step anymore. Your roots run so deep into the ground that you have no choice but to stay right here, right now. The day has been stolen, it will never be mine again. And the

thought about those two girls, those thieves that robbed me, the deep well I've fallen into, how weird – it suddenly feels so sweet, so close. The music is booming through the walls, I sit down on the wide steps at the end of the hallway and return to thinking about my failure of a self. Was there even any way to fail more, to humiliate myself more? No, I need to drink in this evening completely, I need to tumble down to the bottom of this pit, even if just to see where and how it starts. Pauls isn't here, so I've got no choice but to plummet into this darkness alone. How deep into the ground do my roots really run?

The official part of the evening is over. There are some groups of people milling about in the classroom with glasses of "juice", someone calls my name, it's hard to hear their voice over the music. Mārtiņš and Edgars are over by the window at the far end of the room rubbing up against those two, but I don't care anymore. I probably should have laughed in a really loud and exaggerated way. Oh, look, some nobody is coming my way. I could kick him so he'd get out of my sight, the stench of a loser eats through you fast. Some dark-haired dude, his face twisted into a saccharine grovelling grin (who is he, why don't I know him), pours me a shot, it's sour.

"Shit! I'm so sick of your... your name!" I whisper into the ear of this stranger staring at me like a dog at an empty bowl. He's crushed. If a girl gets on tiptoe, while *5 Seconds Of Summer* is playing, to whisper something in your ear, it shouldn't include the word "sick". A freak in a skirt, let's toast the new "me".

"OK, guys, fix your hair and count to ten. Because. We. Are. Going. Hunting!" Finally, I manage to sound decisive and talk without my voice shaking. My glass is empty, the stranger is gone, but, luckily, Mārtiņš is right there and he's always ready to fill it up. "You

really want another one?" He's about to ask me again, but my face probably looks like he should just pour it without asking any more questions.

"Sure! We're going in a second, just a quick smoke, and then we'll roll," Mārtiņš says.

My glass is cool and heavy again, the music is booming, we raise our voices even more.

"He couldn't be that far away, probably hanging around by the garages." Edgars leans thoughtlessly in my direction.

"By our garages," I manage to really draw out each word as I sing them almost in rhythm with the music. In an instant, wine glass in hand, my arms, which apparently don't know what they're even doing, are hugging him. It feels like a really bold move to me, shockingly sexy. I can't stand that word, but right now, yeah, it seems different somehow – just more to the point?

He looks confused – he freezes, wriggles out from my embrace, so awkwardly.

"You're going for a smoke, yeah, I'll have one too..."

"Well, Māra, sweetheart, you just can't keep up. We'll be quick. Just stay here, count to fifty-five, and we'll be back. *Fine?*"

Edgars smiles at me, winks, but he can't fool me. No, not tonight. I look him as straight in the eyes as I can. I flash my teeth at him.

"Mmmm, sweetheart, you're pretty slippery aren't you? Fifty-five sounds great. Mārtiņš, I've booked you for every dance tonight, li-ter-al-ly! *Fine?*" I don't need a thing, this sourpuss isn't as sour anymore, my defeat has vanished – just like that. Like its never happened. What was that story even about?

"Every dance? But what about Pauls?"

"Pauls. Will. Deal. With. It. It's a done deal!" I down the fourth glass, like they say, in a single gulp.

"Listen, I think you've probably had enough." Pretty Laura is being so overbearingly protective all of a sudden, she puts her arm around me and pulls me aside. Seriously? She's really trying to take me away from my class?

"And what now? You're pulling me out of there to do – what?"

"You shouldn't start now..."

"I shouldn't? Great! And the two of you should've? You should've screwed up the night, stolen my event away from me. So, what now?"

"Yeah, what?"

The two of us marched right into the middle of the classroom, some people are staring at us with blank grins on their faces, other look a little scared. The background music gets softer. Those wise-asses, that bank of jokers could've even started drumming out a beat. Laura awkwardly lets go of my shoulder and stands facing me, we probably look like two YouTubers in a ring, though actually, the only YouTuber here is Laura. Nobody would bet on me – Laura is taller, the thick soles of her black lace-up boots make me even a few centimetres shorter.

"You know, if someone told me about it, I wouldn't believe them. It was like a scene from the series "Animal Planet". It's like this – two girl dogs running along the fence, they lift up their hind legs, like this." Balancing on one leg, I look over at Edgars and Mārtiņš. "And

the doggies are on the ground right away, they're ready to chew a hole through the fence, to go straight for the owner's throat, just to get out and get...

"Get what? Sweetheart, you're toasted. This would be just the right moment for you to stick your little foot on that gas pedal. And girl dogs don't lift their legs, they squat." Laura turns away, her back says: "Thanks, our conversation is over." The joker turns it up again, the evening goes on. No, that won't be the end of it!

"Our quartet is breaking up... it's cracking wide open, but the two of you..." I'm yelling in Mārtiņš' surprised face even though I would've wanted to say it differently – more harshly – and then say all of it to Edgars, too. Right in his face. It occurs to me that anything can be changed, you just can't hesitate, you have to act – right here, right now.

I take Mārtiņš by the hand, we squeeze through the crowd of dancers (how can there be so many people in just one class?), my flushed face is on fire.

"Edgars, we need to go. Now." That idiot is dancing slowly with Laura, smiles at me, and doesn't answer. He just doesn't answer! Not at all!

"Listen, we're finally going to go find Pauls. All three of us!" I'm yelling so loudly that some of the couples move away from me a bit. Mārtiņš pulls me aside, but I won't give in, I've become stubborn. My roots run as deep as those of that storm-damaged willow in our yard.

"Māra, don't shout. You go, I'll call in a minute."

He smiles at me, I don't believe my ears, my eyes, my hands – someone has placed a glass in the right one and a circus whip in the left one, which I was supposed to use to keep the whole circus on its best behaviour. The jokers always see opportunities for making

things funny, they just need to pour on a bit of oil and that frail little flame becomes blazing, hot, and unpredictable. Visions of all these incredibly beautiful Lauras and Amandas, smiling Edgarses, tipsy Mārtiņšes, strangers and incredibly sweaty Eļīnas with their trembling hands. Someone has lit some candles – they're sitting squat on the windowsills, they create some light, but seem to make their surroundings even darker. It looks to me like the flames are slowly catching the curtains. Nobody sees it, everybody is too busy jostling together, drinking, all of the many empty twists and turns of relationships. We need to get out of there, the curtains are burning, I'm trying to show them. They're burning, but she – that idiot – is still filming over Edgars' shoulder. I'm staring at them shocked, like it was the first time I was really seeing them.

"No, there's no way, I'm just losing it," I mutter to myself. "The two of you aren't cretins, there's just no way. *Wake up!*" My voice already sounds a lot louder. I'm still standing in the middle of the classroom between all the couples. I've got the whip in my hand and just then a new sort of clarity about the order of things in the world and my role in all of it dawns over me. Amanda has snatched away our Mārtiņš and, as soon as she notices me, a smirk, a mocking grin stretches across her whole face.

Maybe I took two steps, maybe twenty, but suddenly I'm in front of her and the whip strikes, sinks into her pale cheek like a sharp knife cutting into a soft loaf of white bread. My hand had done what my mind hadn't even be able to conceive of yet, and Amanda's shrieking sounds almost musical – like an obvious, logical conclusion to this terrible evening. What will you say now, jokers?

There's blood on her cheek, on her white jacket, on the ground – I guess I wasn't ready for that, my hands didn't know it. Now they're shaking just like Elīna's, I've lost the willow roots anchoring my feet, and also the clarity about the world. The crack of the whip was still echoing in my ears before it reached Amanda's face, but my eyes, those traitors, rushed to close up to keep from filling my little head with any other surprises. I've had enough. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry," my voice says, but my lips have turned to wood. Then for a second or so I'm in back in that well deep underground.

It really was just an instant. The classroom was bright as day, only the windows were dark. The curtains were where they should be, untouched by flames. Edgars is holding some kind of rag up to Amanda's face, she is lisping in a hoarse voice into the receiver:

"Yes, come and get me, some stupid bitch hit me in the face. Come right now."

Mārtiņš helps me stand up, we go out into the hallway. He opens the window, lights a cigarette, sticks it between my lips, lights one for himself."

"You crossed a line, Māra. Nobody imagined you were capable of that... And where did you get that whip? *Nafig?*" We sit down on the windowsill and don't say a word.

A black car pulls up to the school. Amanda has something that looks like a towel, like a sheet. She opens the door, the light goes on inside the car, a man is sitting there wearing a green rapper's cap on his head.

"Who's that?" I stare down at them from above.

"Her buddy. He's a lot older, has money. Listen, we should go..."

"No. I'm on my own. Thanks, Mārtiņš."

I breathe out some smoke, I feel nauseous almost as suddenly as I'd felt clear about the state of the world just a moment ago. I leave behind that sourpuss right there on the school's grey linoleum. There's some more sourpuss, and then also a bilious liquid that had been stored up inside of me, collecting there for years. Mārtiņš is coming over with paper towels, leans down, I try to take them away from him, but my hands – my bold and self-sufficient hands – are limp and feeble now.

"I'm on my own," I barely force out the words and lay down on the floor.

"On your own, on your own, sure. Five minutes from now I'll come and get you, you definitely can't stay here."

Edgars' motorcycle sputters to life outside the window. He's talking to somebody. I prop myself up on my knees, I peer over the counter. Laura is putting on the same red helmet that I'd refused to wear this summer, I'd told him how I wasn't going to put "that kind of kettle" on my head, even though actually I was just scared of riding a motorcycle. I'd lost my nerve. Everything seemed to make sense to me now, all of it was connected with being scared. Fear. Powerlessness. Cowardice. Shame.

Fear has no weight. Everything else in the world does, but not fear. Sadness weighs us down, I want to be down on the ground, to lie down and become one with the grass in the yard; joy propels us skyward, way up to the top of my bent-over willow, up to the blackbird, to my beloved *sturnus vulgaris*, which visits us every spring. Even when I'm angry I feel lighter – not like I could shoot up into the sky, but more like I could bounce like a spring, leaping up and dashing things to pieces when I come down again. In moments of humility, I feel light and it keeps me above the water. Only fear has none of that.

On the way home I sit down on the bench at the tram stop. Everybody has left, they're all across the bridge, the river, in a different part of town. All of it out of my reach. I'm staying over here on this side, because I'm terrified of setting foot on that bridge. I want to tell someone that all of it isn't like it turned out tonight. It's all totally different. I write Edgars, it's the middle of the night and there's nobody else I want to write. Not sweet Pauls. I dragged him into this terrible circus and lost him. Pauls, where are you now? Not Mārtiņš. He's like a flame racing across those curtains – blazing up, but already out a second later. Is that flame only pretending to be big? Is it really just a flicker shooting off of a sparkler? My hands remember what to do, they start writing.

Māra

So all three of us are taking care of this?

Hello?

And what about our promise?

Remember?

Yeah, sorry, it'll all pass, of course.

⊗

Everything passes

au revoir

bye.

A fragment of the third part of the novel "THORNS"

Māra and the leap into the unknown

It's Friday afternoon and the school is humming. Some of the grandmas are already there an hour before the concert, then the moms show up with all sorts of children, next are the moms coming on their own, then the dads on their own, and finally a few couples. The whole day was just a hellish frenzy for me – plotting my revenge and also avoiding Edgars. His birthday is soon, so far there's no news. Will I make it without what mom calls a "golden youth" party? Easily. Laura and Amanda look like they're forcing themselves to appear as disinterested as possible. The clown show they'd ordered is happening tonight, but here they are just yawning and stretching. Pauls and I aren't yawning at all.

Yesterday the four of them had gotten a "tender" reminder from Amanda about the money and the show. "It's on." – I answered briefly. No answer from her. I can see Pauls is fighting again with his fear and low self-esteem, but at the end of the day, he's still a man and practically sends me a poem.

Pauls

This time I'll be there.

You can depend on me.

The butterfly will flap its wings.

The masks will fall.

Finally, something good happens! I text him back a heart, then I start wondering whether I should have. Pauls gets up from the bench, there's something about his gaze... I don't even know what to think. I can't send him any hearts. Luckily, Mārtiņš gets involved, I show him the phone, he works on it for a long time, Pauls shakes his head, he disagrees. It rings. It's time.

The auditorium is overflowing. The first concert by the first-graders can compete easily with Ed Sheeran – there are phones held above heads, tears, clapping, people repeatedly yelling "play it again". The difference is that instead of a high-powered opening act, we get the somewhat apathetic teacher Ms. Akmens. Her special trick for getting everyone's attention is long pauses accompanied by staring down at everyone "from above" – with a slightly upturned chin and subtle smirk. She stands there like that and waits until the conversations turn into murmuring and the laughter and coughing die away; embarrassed latecomers, their backs arched, stare hopelessly at the overfilled rows and then lean against the back wall of the auditorium.

"Dancing, my dears, is the start of a great and beautiful life," Ms. Akmens begins speaking so loudly and suddenly that it makes some in the audience to jump.

"One that is glorious and true."

This is followed by her usual number – a long silence, which kills off the last mumbles and murmurs.

"It is the foundation of our people and our country. Our youngest dancers will start off the evening, which is symbolic of..."

Ms. Akmens turns the page and then stares pointedly off into the wings and motions gently with her chin. Someone in the audience laughs loudly, she frowns and tries to spot them – someone she would probably call "that anarchist". Silent as a grave, I think about Pauls, I think about him and how he's changing his clothes, he probably has his headphones turned up as high as they go just so he doesn't have to think about it, imagine it."

"Don't think about it, you don't need to, I'll think about all of it for you," I whisper the words I wrote this morning about those two girls, those conspirators, who have worked single-mindedly to destroy an old friendship, to destroy someone's life with blackmail and lies. My life.

The dancers start assembling on stage, the dance teacher Ms. Apse is pushing, shoving, and pulling around the dazed first-graders. The pause this time was super long, Ms. Akmens takes a few steps toward the audience, her massive carp-like lips almost touch the microphone, she continues.

"...symbolic of the beginning of the new school year and the beginning of a new phrase of life for our first-grade boys. And girls."

She laughs. The audience is dead silent.

"Yes, and, as our great Rainis said, 'the little birds begin to wake, tweeting still half-asleep in the field; just another hour and the sun will be here, bringing life in a golden vessel.'"

"Amen!" someone yells.

Having read her last lines, Ms. Akmens disappears into the wings. The music starts, the little dancers tumble out on stage shoving each other as they begin shuffling about awkwardly. Some of them remember that they're supposed smile, others just stare – terrified by all the onlookers, the blazing projector lights, and the camera flashes. That's exactly how I felt too in this same spot a week ago. Events tend to repeat. Today I have to atone for my mistake. As soon as Pauls is on stage, I'll go and stand next to him, so that the entire audience and both of those bitches can see – now I'm the one filming you!

During the third dance my phone shudders in my moist palm with the fifth text from Amanda – "So, now?" – I feel like I can't keep pretending that I have the serenity of a yoga teacher. I don't even know how, but I'm suddenly out of the auditorium, four leaps and I'm down the stairs, two more and I'm in the other wing of the school and almost all the way to the classroom when I hear Mārtiņš' monotone voice. I stop in the shadows in the hallway.

"Sorry, dude, it's for your own good. I know you feel guilty, but there's no way to fix it." Mārtiņš is interrupted by a loud thud. "No way! As soon as the dancing is over, we're going home."

Another impressive thud, I should go over there and ask what the hell is going. But something holds me back.

He continues in a calming tone:

"Buddy, believe me, it's for your own good. Just for your own good. And what was the deal with that butterfly effect?"

Thud.

"Sure, sure, I get it. You'd been rehearsing... You wanted to save us all, especially our Māra, and it's so great that you pulled yourself together like that, but..."

I don't hear anything else, because there's a huge commotion on the first floor. Somebody is yelling to call an ambulance, there's the sound of approaching steps. One of the people on duty, an athletic guy with messy hair wearing a dark green sweater, who seems to be from Grade 11.c, almost knocks me off my feet as he runs straight towards our classroom where Mārtiņš is hanging out by the door.

"What are you doing here... Somebody just jumped out of the window," he wheezes in a hoarse, unnaturally low voice.

"What?"

"Open the door, fool, there's a person..." The athlete grabs the keys out of Mārtiņš' hand (yeah, why were the keys in his hand?) and dives towards the lock.

"He just jumped."

More steps, somebody else is rushing over, but the guy in the green sweater and I are inside first. Mārtiņš is standing confused at the door. The window is open, the curtains are flapping in the autumn wind. The athletic guy leans out confidently, I stand next to him and cast a quick glance down to see what I'd already sensed in these last seconds. Pauls is lying down there. A background of yellow leaves highlights his light grey trousers and his brilliant white clown outfit. Somewhere nearby there's the wail of an ambulance siren. I

wrench myself away, not wanting to see blood, not wanting to see it soaking into Pauls' white clothing, then into the yellow leaves around him, then into the ground. There will always be a reddish splotch there, and our grandchildren, if we even have them, will tell their kids: "Yeah, Latvia was about a hundred then when a student jumped out of the window of that school, because he just couldn't take it..."

"Māra, I don't know what to do, it's my fault."

Mārtiņš has tears in his eyes. He puts a trembling hand in front of his mouth and nose, his nails are long and dirty. He should cut them.

"Why is it yours?"

"Because he... was going to go to that clown show, he was talking about some kind of butterfly effect, and then I... I locked him in there, so he couldn't go, because..."

Mārtiņš grabs his head, pushing his dirty nails into his hair, and crouches down on the ground. People come and go from the classroom, we're constantly being pushed and shoved.

"You locked him in?"

"I locked him in, yeah. So he wouldn't crash, wouldn't look like an idiot in front of the whole school. Edgars and I thought that..."

"Later, OK? Let's go downstairs now!" It finally occurs to me that we have to get to Pauls before the paramedics take him away.

While we're still forcing our way through the crowd, the car is turning out of the yard. Edgars is coming towards us, smiling.

"It's not so bad, he'll live."

"What's wrong with him?"

"I don't know, they never really tell you anything anyway. But he was breathing and babbling something about shoes. He'd slipped..."

"Fuuuuck!" Mārtiņš is being pulled down toward the ground again, it must be some sort of anxiety release mechanism for him – to be closer to the ground. "I thought that he'd... Fuuuuck, why the hell did I lock him in there?"

"It's nothing, he'll be OK. At least he didn't suffer the shame he would've if..."

"There wouldn't have been any shame, Edgars!" I already feel like hitting him again. Just once, but hard, so his narrow-minded self-confidence, limitless know-it-allism – which I hadn't really noticed in the past – would just shut off for once. Lately, Fridays are turning out in a way that makes me aggressive. "We'd planned everything out, we'd unmask those two girls, those pigs so tomorrow we wouldn't have to make any excuses to mother."

"To mother? What do you mean? Edgars furrows his brow. When he's trying to understand something, is being mischievous, or is unconvinced, long ripples shoot across his pale forehead.

"It's not important, I need to go now, but the two of you could... Nevermind, it doesn't matter." For an instant, I think about how I could bring them along and then the three of us could tell the school what happened. But, no. That's for me to do on my own, because I was Pauls' great inspiration and planner after all. What a shitty inspiration though – pushing him practically to the brink of death!

Everything happened incredibly fast. When I get back to the auditorium, someone had just whispered the news about Pauls into the teacher's ear, the little ones are still on

stage, a confused murmur is rising from the audience. If you perked up your ears just then, you could still catch a few notes of the quickly vanishing music.

"I must apologise to all of the guests and dancers, but unfortunately we have to end our concert tonight, because..."

For the first time I see complete confusion wash across Ms. Akmens' flushed face. She is looking for words she can use to translate the news she has just received into an acceptable announcement, but she doesn't get the chance to finish her sentence. I'm on stage, I politely take the microphone out of her hand, I hear my own voice from the side. It seems foreign, sharp and metallic, unpleasant.

"Hello. While you..." The microphone shrieks wildly. "While you are sitting here at this pleasant, enjoyable event, one of our students – Pauls... Pauls Ziediņš – has fallen out of the window, because..."

Ms. Akmens is staring at me like some sort of a spectre, she tries to snatch the microphone away from me, but I hang onto it with a vice-like grip. She hisses:

"Egle, what do you think you're doing, what's happened to you?" And it's close enough to the microphone for everyone to hear it. I keep going.

"Yes, just like that! Pauls jumped and not without any reason, no. The truth is..." The teacher is coming at me, beet red. She has recovered.

"Stop this performance immediately! Māra Egle, what's happened to you?! Parents have come here to see a concert and..."

"Yes, your concert, I understand that very well, that there's a concert, but the truth is... It should've been him – Pauls – standing where I am right now, to show you his clown act, because some of us... There are some people among us..."

"No, you listen, leave this auditorium right away! Can someone help me?" Ms. Akmens is staring daggers at Ms. Apse – she and all of her students are looking at us with their mouths open. "You're clearly drunk." Ms. Akmens doesn't get any further, because the audience gets involved.

"Let her speak, let her speak!" shouts a man in a white shirt who looks not unlike Artūrs Skrastiņš.

"I... need to announce here and now, so everyone knows – who in this tragedy is... the guilty party! There are two people here – two girls, students at our school – and they are right here in this auditorium!" I look at Amanda and Laura who are filming everything with bated breath. While we're fighting off the teacher, people start leaving the auditorium – first those standing in the back, then those sitting in the middle and front rows. Many are staring at their phones, somebody apparently had sent them a text about what had just happened.

"Wait! The most important thing is – he jumped to... protest against the crazy blackmail and terror directed against us by these two little ladies, these dolls." I lift up my hand and point at the two girls. "In truth, they are the worst kind of... trash. Yeah, yeah, don't even stare like that, as if you didn't know what I was talking about."

"Well, girls, you've got a real drama here. Shakespeare, you know, is taking a break," a mother of diminutive stature comments and some of the audience even thinks it's funny. Funny!

Ms. Akmens and Ms. Apse have disappeared, somebody shuts off the floodlights and microphone. I shout from the stage at the backs of those leaving as they shake with wicked laughter.

"They're planning a new attack tomorrow, I know all about it..." But my voice now disappears at the edge of the stage. I hear Ms. Akmens hissing right into my ear:

"Monday morning in my office, bring your mother!"

I see the auditorium emptying out, I'm alone again on this damned stage, and Friday night has pushed me into a pit. With Pauls. Again – because of me. Laura and Amanda are standing in front of me, they don't say a word, they just stare. Amanda takes my picture, twirls her finger next to her temple, then they both leave. My phone buzzes.

Amanda

Your fine just doubled

In my account by Sunday

Monday Akmens gets the video

Fin.

She doesn't say anything about Saturday to me, but right now I don't care about details like that. My phone buzzes again.

Pauls

Alive, alive, yeah!

The wrong shoes for this job

You 3 can go fuck yourselves

That's it, I'm off.

Later that evening when I've sent Pauls what seem like hundreds of texts with questions and encouragements, I remember Joe the stray, our last conversation by the garages, and the image of the cow traced out by the tops of the birch trees, which had given me strength. I keep repeating to myself, "Today I've lost my mind." If someone talks to a dead dog and sees portentous messages in tree shadows, what other diagnosis can there be? Today I don't have to hide, mom is at the theatre (it had been a long time since I'd seen her take so much time getting ready, and that bright red lipstick too...), and so I go try to find my "cow". Maybe it will be able to tell me, explain to me, what's really wrong with me? It's windy tonight. I don't see cows or dogs in the birch tree. Just ordinary autumn leaves on ordinary birch branches. A trunk that once was as thick as my arm and its top swaying in the wind. Whether it's happy people, bloody battles, the broken-hearted, or the proud standing under your branches, you don't care about any of it, birch tree! It doesn't answer. It truly doesn't care and so there's no chance for me to rest my head on a shoulder and cry.