

Biography: Rvīns Varde (1985) works as a transcriber for the intellectual monthly magazine *Rīgas Laiks*, literally filling himself with the thoughts and recollections of numerous wise and bright personalities from various countries, backgrounds, and professions. These daily, spiritual contacts have undeniably left a mark on his writing style and are sometimes referred to in his texts. It should be mentioned that birdwatching and photography are among his favorite pastimes. He has a keen eye for detail and remarkable ability to express himself in a rich and thought-provoking, yet approachable and entertaining manner. *Kas te notiek* [What's Goin' on There] is Varde's literary debut that was awarded the Annual Latvian Literature Award in 2020.

Synopsis: *What’s Goin’ on There* is one of the most impressive literary debuts of 2019 in the category of documentary fiction. This is the vivid collection of Varde’s observations on the everyday life of contemporary Latvian society – a string of over one hundred short episodes wherein his sharp, humoristic descriptions of things happening here and now – either with Varde himself or with somebody right beside him – often turn into deeper contemplations on some aspect of our perception of current reality.

Excerpt

It’s possible to travel the whole world while lounging in bed. You can remember that bumpy meadow, that twisted ankle, the dried grass, the forest that night where the only thing that mattered was making it to morning: a chanterelle mushroom you saw fifteen years ago, which, hopefully, still stands there, stiff as an officer in an honor guard: to promise yourself you’ll dump cold water on your head in the morning and go for a run, as if that were a good

thing: to laud inspiration, wait for change, lose your scarf and find it again even if it's someone else's, drink the liquid from a can of peas, ponder the implacability of rust: to hunger for resonance: to feel more like a triangle, less like an oval: to compare, measure, all of it – while lounging around.

But then I went to Lithuania on a guided tour. Some kids there asked me timidly to buy them Blue Lagoon cocktails. They even showed them to me; they were blue. I thought, well, don't their warm hearts deserve a reward? I agreed and was arrested near the exit.

One night I came across an interview with a cold-blooded old man who was responsible for carrying out death sentences in Belarus up until the '90s. There were a dozen people under his command whose mission was secret. Even the people they lived with didn't have an inkling as to this side job their partners were carrying out for a little extra cash. Those sentenced often cut the words "death sentence" out of the documents they were given. They refused to accept their verdicts, but, when they heard the court's decision, they often wet their pants. One stabbed himself in the eye, hoping that he would not be shot. Two others hung themselves. A guard would look into the cells every eight minutes, so after the first man hung himself, the other had to tuck him into bed at the exact right moment, and could only hang himself after. They shot them in the forest at night, then buried them. They had them get down on their knees, so it would be easier to aim, then shot them.

Occasionally a doctor determined that they had to be shot again. Then they took the noose

off so they could fall into the hole. Upon doing this sort of thing for the first time, the old man was surprised at just how much blood was in the human head. He said he couldn't sleep for three days, but then he got used to it. He felt especially sorry for the young people, but thought, if it was possible for them to carry out all those atrocities, the sentenced must not be all there in the head. The majority of them suffered in silence, they did not resist. He said the state sentenced them, and he just carried out the sentences. And then I fell asleep, but for some reason I was executed in my dreams as well.

Yesterday a woman in the bus was talking on the phone. She declared, "I'm not going to wear that pinafore dress." A moment later, again, insistently, "I can't wear that pinafore dress." Then slowly. "I w-i-l-l n-o-t w-e-a-r t-h-a-t p-i-n-a-f-o-r-e d-r-e-s-s." And so on and so forth for several minutes. It sounded like someone was trying to force that pinafore dress on her. Taking into account that I never found out if they forced it on her or not, it is no surprise I was markedly neutral on the subject.

Today, two girls came into the café. One sat near the window. The sunlight coming through the window shone on her a little, her pantyhose smooth and flawless as the surface of a pond. And I thought that I might take a photo of them sitting there, like a symbol of hope, like characters in a silent film. They sat there without saying a thing. They were not silent out of boredom, but with their whole bodies, swimmingly. Then they drank their coffee and left. So it was. I felt almost proud for them. And there was not a pinafore dress between them.