

Biography: Andris Zeibots (né Andris Bērziņš), born in 1950, is a Latvian playwright and author, director, writer and producer. Together with his colleagues, Andris Zeibots founded Playwrights Theatre, which stages only contemporary drama. He is an active member of the Children and Young writer's literary competitions. Most of his life Zeibots has been writing literary essays and other works, never limiting himself to a certain genre.

Synopsis: The novel *Krauklis* by Andris Zeibots is about one of the most popular Latvian poets of the 1920s and 30s – the "most consistent Romantic", Jānis Ziemeļnieks. The author has classified the novel *Krauklis* as "a fantasy with the involvement of history", and the reader is brought directly into the atmosphere that prevailed at a particular period of Ziemeļnieks' life. After treatment at Šēnfelds' Nerve Clinic, the poet grapples with the issue of how he can continue living. Ziemeļnieks would very much like to keep his promise never to touch opium again, however, the harsh intermingling of vision and reality compels him to once more seek out the embrace of demonic Haijalija - a character in a 1930 play by the foremost Latvian female playwright Aspazija.

Excerpt

Jānis Krauklis was sitting on a bench in the middle of carriage number 3, he was a broad-shouldered though pale and gaunt man about thirty years of age, wearing round Veidenbaums' era student spectacles and a greyish brown broadbrimmed hat which only a moment ago had been resting quietly in his lap, but then he had looked behind him in alarm, as if fearing to see behind his back a spectre that he'd never known before, then he had murmured something to himself before sinking once more into a freely wandering otherworldly gaze. Who would know what impulse, what flash of memory, what nervous tic

had raced through the nerves of his entire body, snagging in his consciousness as if caught fast in the noose of a snare, demanding that he does something without being aware of it, and, lo and behold, the hand placed the hat on his head quite without thinking – is it proper to do so, or not, does he need to, or does he not...

At that moment he was not observing himself from the outside.

To be more precise, he *was* observing, except that he saw himself in a quite different role, maybe that of a hero. At least not in the guise of a random passenger.

He was a famous poet, the custodian and trailblazer of the nascent inklings of his cohort of idealists, a deviser of symbols, the wood carver of love deities for a tribe concealed in virgin forest, the heroes of which, backs pressed closely against each other and spears extended, were anxiously awaiting an attack by unfriendly beings.

His lips were tightly pursed, as if fighting pain. His back was aching, as it did constantly.

He endured his physical life as stoically as an explorer of polar ice caps.

Once upon a time his first publisher had named him Ziemeļnieks – The Northerner, as a bard who was born in the upper part of a map of Latvia, and that is how it had remained, right up until the present day.

Yes, there he sat, with a dreamy gaze, roaming around among the phantoms of his imagination, always rushing somewhere in his thoughts, along parallel rails invisible to others, ones that perhaps led from bottom to top, on a cloud train hurtling forwards which

might have been travelling through the wide expanses of history, through fields of ideas in parallel and diverging, now up, now down, while the train passengers sitting nearest to him stared at him uncomprehendingly, then fairly quickly turned away because they had their own affairs. Their own conversations, their own herd territories to protect and to cultivate. Others merely shrugged their shoulders and couldn't care less, preferring instead to pull out an ashtray from the wall and light up a cigarette.

Some chatted to their relatives and acquaintances, others – stared directly in front of themselves, as if guarding the territory of their personal physical space.

Their thoughts spun around matters of practical reality.

Many, many minds vibrating within themselves, each separate from the other in their own remote world, their own sphere of consciousness. To an extent there is usually an attempt to unite the vast diversity mentioned into a sum total of the realities of all people's internal worlds, where the individual residing within recognises in their internal world the possibility of other worlds which, possibly, overlap as much as they are discrete.

The railway lines rumble, the world slides past.

Ever since it left Riga, the train had never been quite empty, and throughout the journey it seemed that more passengers were joining along the way than alighting.

While still at the station in Riga, Jānis had helped lift up a few pieces of baggage into the luggage netting and he'd let a small boy in a sailor's suit sit by the window, and next to him his mother in a dark brown, oh, how proper, frock of the previous century - that is, a

model of late 19th century fashion – long in length, with puffed up shoulders and black, Spanish style woven lace at the collar. A genuine smalltown matron, you wouldn't find another more typical.

She had a headache, so it seemed, since she kept her hand pressed to her temple. Or was that also merely as part of the behaviour in line with the role she was playing out in civic manners and theatricality. Or was it a reaction after the recent row right here in the train, where, as if in parody of themselves, a crowd of drunken university students wearing caps in their fraternity colours, irrepressibly jolly, however, so noisy in their doings that, accompanied by the joint choir of mutterings of indignation aroused in the other passengers, they were banished from the carriage. For a good long while after the young people had departed to another carriage, the small community of passengers was still rippling with waves of condemnation.

And that's what our future society is going to be like!

They are the so-called intellectuals! Someone even pronounced this neologism, appropriated from the press, *inkerleckchuls*.

And then the melody recommenced, in the rhythm of "one plus one is lev-eleven", the same as before...

A countryfolk couple sat on the seat opposite, they were talking non-stop about the wet summer, about the unceasing rain and the flooded fields, about the whole day spent wandering around in Riga, from shop to shop, searching for a useful instrument that was

nowhere to be found, moreover, on cobbles that could break your leg, about fashion goods, those that weren't needed and those that were necessary yet inaccessible, whether because of price or simply because they were nowhere to be found, about the endless chores to be done and again and again about the forecasted weather, perhaps even worse than before, the themes repeating over and over again, as if they had instantly forgotten what they'd said only a moment beforehand.

And so they simmered in the repetition of what they'd already talked about, and in the repetitions of repetitions, ones they'd just discussed half an hour ago, and those present in their company could rest assured that this would not end for the entire journey, hour after hour, the train slowly rumbling "clickety-clack, clickety-clack, one plus one is lev-eleven" in the direction of Valmiera.

Next to the countrywoman, pushed into the seat meant for a third passenger, there was a basket draped over by a chequered shawl. What on earth could she be bringing home from Riga? Maybe nothing at all now, maybe the shawl covered up emptiness, when all the produce they had taken with them had already been successfully sold off at the market on the banks of the River Daugava?

Similar faintly turbulent moods were in the atmosphere all around, each with their own cares. For one the burden was lighter, for another...

The young Mr Krauklis, not yet quite recovered from recent illness, subdued by unremitting internal pain and the oppressive sensation of heaviness from muscles strained in anticipation, allowed his outwardly seemingly absent-minded gaze to flow without

encountering anything, in keeping with his chaotic thoughts of the present moment – in ebb and flow, surging up and immediately receding... "all that bright peacefulness that fate had endowed me"...

Not well... still not well... and who's to know when the expected return to health would come... Perhaps never.

He was now sitting next to the aisle. That was the most inconvenient seat in the carriage when there were passengers who had just got on still seeking a place to sit. Just as well that in the last half hour nobody had attempted to squeeze past, earlier he had felt so anxious on seeing someone heading towards him bearing all their suitcases.

Every little trifle in this shapeless monotony felt as if he was being struck, the flash of a knife on his nerves.

...one plus one is lev-eleven...

Yes, even the repetitive murmur of the train was difficult to bear. The air of the carriage faintly perfumed with the whiff of oil quietly rumbled as a background to the indivisible choir of passenger conversations.

Unbearable, but must be endured! Unbearable, but must be endured – the wheels of the carriage clanged against the rails...

And the further they went, the more it seemed to grow in strength, twanging like a drawn-out string, with a growing intensity of dread, some kind of unbearable, life-

threatening – perhaps only seemingly so, but no less bothersome all the same - sensation of

an impending explosion, in exactly the same way as, look – there outside the window – the pastel-toned, Purvītis-like Latvian scene with its diffused colours seemed to become increasingly heightened in vividness, the aromatic fumes undulating, the lines expressively sharpening and in the interruptions of their etched currents already, like blood boiling, the surfeit of the colours of nature burbled in this chaos of plant and earth, as it could reveal itself to the eyes that were present.

Pulsating in memories swelling up and coming to the surface like subterranean energy and ever increasing new bubbles bursting in a spring, through the eyes of a city-dweller whose sojourn there has now reached into teens of years and to which, sick to death of the greyness of the downpours, he had fled from the rural life of his childhood, the city where he sought to learn how to ride for a while in the carousel of a life shimmering with colour and to even feel some joy.

Some time ago it had seemed like that - with a little bit of help from his friends, it is starting to turn out quite well!

The "Broadway" of Elizabetes iela, with the jazz lights of the cafes on the Esplanade and in Riga Old Town twinkling like the flashes of rust in a nocturnal sky before a thunderstorm.

And now, Jānis feels that he is fed up even with that.

Too much hurly-burly there was in the world, incomprehensible twists and turns, people's fashionable pretentiousness, a chaos of blatant lies invented for the cultivation of

selfish interests and the trade of morals - and this labyrinth covered up another labyrinth and became caught up in tangles impossible to unravel. What's the point of it, if he attempts to depict everything that exists in all its convoluted oddities, moreover, while he himself is wandering around as if through an impenetrable jungle? Even if a piece of literary work were to have a profound content, the forms of language woven in virtuoso manner and the author himself appeared to be tormented by the issues whirling around in his mind... It is possible to create with artistic intricacy – yet so pedestrianly!

But the excellence lies in clarity alone! Cleanliness and beauty are there!

That kind of convolutedness is not in human nature! As contrast to the daily chaos of nature there must be the expansiveness of poetry, its simplicity and shining ideals.

Yes, the critics do assert that only the one and the same string dominates in The Northerner's poetry, that he varies the same old themes, and not many of them at that.

But it is a world in which one can think and ultimately to live!

In it one can understand. Even if at times it would seem that longing and desperation amplified the darkness and hopelessness of existential cognizance...

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Let us close our eyes... Time ticks and tocks in endless repetitions – a signal, a pause, a signal – and so...on... so... on...

If Time, with its duration, is vital for a literary narrative, it must be specially remarked upon: a moment passed, several minutes, a year, a lifetime...

Because over a long progression The Event makes visible that which otherwise occurs at infinitesimal speed, in one flash of perception, in one momentary flare-up coloured by the senses.

All of it merely a glance through the window of the carriage...

This particular day happened to be uncharacteristically warm for this summer, the ground soaked by the downpours was drying out, the moisture of the earth, having been transformed into steam, wafted from down below up to the clouds. But on the whole the people sitting opposite in the carriage were saying that the summer this year was not at all as hot as it had been other years, rather the opposite – at the strand in Jūrmala the swimming season hasn't even really started, there have been huge floods in Zemgale, great losses to farming folk, let's see whether the government decides to help or will fudge it as usual.

Birch groves flashed past the windows.

If only Jānis had wanted to pay the slightest attention to all the inadvertently

summery scenes of today, there, outside, but he at the time perceived them more through

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More information: info@latvianliterature.lv

the sensory receptors of his imagination, through intuition, less with the faculties of seeing, hearing and touch, as they say - empirically... In those signs of the quotidian, in those symbols drowned in physical materiality, where many saw something sentimentally attractive, as often enough happens when looking back into the memories of the more distant past and its legacy, censored by consciousness and with only notions of the tearfully beautiful prevailing... so it all revolved around in a gigantic carousel.

Birds in the air, beast in the forests – those who look superficially can enthuse, they who understand nature will know that this idyll is rife with justifiable murder, everyone needs to survive – each living being.

Only the human being must be moral.

He suspected there an error of the mind, a kind of negative aspect of spirituality, a macabre dance in the world of ideas.

The waves of pain and passion are driven by the tiny world of organisms.

Everyone permits themselves the small joys of bohemian life; for Jānis they are already forbidden.

Now he must stifle it within himself...

He will endeavour to avoid passion.

Right now, after the arctic bright white walls of the hospital.

He does not belong there, outside...

The world with its symbols tumbles down and buries him like an avalanche... Hold pressed close to yourself the little crystal castle toy – the talent for poetry. Perhaps through that he will somehow succeed in saving himself...

His childhood was grimmer than many a eulogizer of pastoral scenes would like to portray. Truly, in his memories the short period of early childhood seemed empty and cold, not a hint of a happy childhood. Cold facts lined up. When censoring them in some way, as if seeking brighter colours, little would be left over that was worth remembering - the interminable grey chain of events stretches out over his experiences as a shepherd boy, muddy as well as sun dried and hot in the summer - what to do when the herd runs amok – the sultry heat, sweat; in the autumn these are replaced by the chill desperation of the fog of early morning, or the thin clothing, being wet to the skin in the rain, the flesh shivering through and through, and gritted teeth: "Be a man..." Hang in there!

And the grains of sleep heaped in his eyes when he has to rise, practically in the middle of the night, before dawn.

A little to one side of that, another impression in the background, like an old-world photo: the spirit of strength – his father – old Pēteris Krauklis in his manor overseer's short fur coat and rabbit fur cap, he still cherished this wraith dissolving in the mist of the past – truly it could be conceded – almost as the very first impression from childhood in the clean slate of memories blessed by their first meeting.

If only... later...

Yes, except what is the good of it – shedding light on the first impression!

Evanescent apparitions flitting about in the mists, as if to be recalled, or not...

Even these celebrations of earliest belief did not escape injury. Time scythed as it passed! No first premonitions would be safe from later attacks by the three-headed gods of destiny, those *moirai* – fates of misfortune, and then those later echoes of cries in the darkness of the background subconscious, not destined to be forgotten, the antheap of poison humming in the ball of our life's yarn, those deities letting flow the small threads of lives, because first of all memory reiterated that horrific realisation, that first childhood encounter with the end of everything – observing with the terror of a disintegrating idyll one's father dying from a horrific illness, he had cancer. The radiations of hope and happiness retreated back even deeper into the distant background of nocturnal skies, at the same time sinking into the sandy soil of the grave right here at one's feet...

Evanesced into a haze.

There are smaller mishaps that the memory heals, just as tiny scratches in the body will heal. Then all that remains is the image of a pleasantly idyllic past, sheared of everyday difficulties and pain.

But not everything can be cured.

Not everything can be erased by the censors of memory. Likewise – if an arm has been pulled off, the body will not be able to regrow another one of its own accord, like at other times it will grow over a trifling scratch ...

Yes, father as a starosta, the headman of Bakūžu Manor... That's the way it is.
Unloved by his neighbours – the taskmaster, as ever a traitor among his own people. Now deceased.

He who is dead is forgiven! That was the last lesson that remained with Jānis from him.

Mother also as if burnt out, grew tired, without the previous brightness of the eyes.

Jānis now had to find an occupation, an opportunity to earn a living. It was terrible, nothing worked out.

Maybe it was the layout of his soul – already from the start in poetic expression free-flowing, impossible to fix into any building walls, unframed by bridge constructions and vague as to the orientation of rails... Unsuitable for the trade of cobbler, alien to the diligence and the love of order of an apothecary's apprentice. Too clumsy for farm work, unfit for the army. The metier of photographer seemed more or less suitable for his nature, but...

As it says in the book: "This too shall pass".

Like the rolling progress tapped out by the wheels of a carriage, it runs its course and vanishes.

A person is confused in the midst of so many roads that cross his way. Under threat of the elements. Many become exhausted and fall.

And then what about Jānis's own interminable illnesses as a teenage boy, they start soon after a failed appendicitis operation. Pain, ceaselessly repeating pain, at night it stabbed him as if with knives. The consequences of physical, purely bodily life were like an enduring torture and hopelessness of the spirit...

Then a medicine was found, a kindly doctor prescribed opium...

But best not to think about that! That must be forgotten. The doctor was promised – the promise must be held. For his own sake. That is why Jānis fled from Riga to be with his sister Alīda, now bearing her husband's surname Eglīte. In Valmiera he will be welcomed to a peaceful home on the outskirts of a small town.

For a while he will be able to forget the previous order of the day, the whirlwind of Riga friends and cafes which could function as a trap for a new vicious circle of ill health.

And what then?

What is there for him, if he has to live somehow differently?

What's that – differently?

He has to bury, as if in a grave, in a conifer needle lined pit, all the habits of city life, all the familiar daily routine.

To start again from the beginning!

Yes. Unquestioningly!

And perhaps to stay in Valmiera, to live there permanently... Why ever not, and also

much closer to his mother still living in Strenči.

Truly, it may be that he is going to his sister's so that in the close-knit company of relatives he will be able to, like in the graveyard mound of yesteryear, bury that which has passed him by, and to awaken new hopes...

Even so! Let thoughts such as these console him, if that is at all possible! However doom-laden the atmosphere of fate should be, due to this to stare outside the window at nature embodying the model of a pastoral painting by Purvītis, a mid-June landscape overabundant with maturing fecundity and hence glorified as being in keeping with the values and future dreams of a man of the land, from him, poet of the city, elicited no empathy... "and the mire of life that I left behind"... That is where the physical world lies – and only there!

Sun, yes, light clouds, moods that are an invitation to bliss, if viewed in passing and ignoring the manure in the livestock sheds, the bluish frozen feet of the little shepherds standing on a mound in the bog with silt splashing; the dark half circles of the sweaty armpits of farmworkers ploughing and harrowing, mowing and piling into loads; the sharp shards of the rocks on the high road – in those instances there is nothing romantic in nature, only tailings and chippings, tar and quagmire ...

As in: "My dream I waded through anew..."