

**Biography:** Writer and journalist Aivars Ozoliņš (1957) studied at the Faculty of Foreign Languages at the University of Latvia. Renowned as one of the first Latvian postmodern writers, he made his debut in the late 1980s with a novella entitled *Gandrīz simts* [Almost a Hundred] in 1989. His seminal work is the book *Dukts*, a cult classic of Latvian postmodernism fiction, which had clear intentions to cast doubt on the entire purpose of fiction and writing.

**Synopsis:** First published in 1991, *Dukts* is one of the very few books with staying power from that heady era in Latvian literature when authors immersed themselves in all that had been previously forbidden or unwelcome. In 2014 the book was republished, and it is still being enthusiastically discussed yet again at universities and dorm rooms all over Latvia. The book offers a kaleidoscopic mixture of characters, ideas and wordplay, mostly centred on the concept of “Dukts” – a word with no real meaning in Latvian. The book details all the futile historical attempts to define or comprehend Dukts before showing the concept in practice with a brilliant series of surreal short stories.

## Excerpt

### Awakening

Once, having woken up from an agonizing dream – as if he had woken up one morning in his bed after a restless night, having turned into a horrible insect – Vilibalds Bimberbaums saw that he hadn't turned into a horrible insect after all. Lying on his tingling back, he lifted up his head a bit and saw his stomach – brownish, swollen, amply overgrown with hair on its far end, with a similar sparser, hairiness also thriving on the downslope at the other end.

The rounded peak, though, was barren. The insides of his skinny arms were also covered

with short, light hairs and Vilibalds enjoyed moving all ten of his fingers.

He turned his gaze to the window, and a grey autumn day – occasional raindrops pattering against the tin of the windowsill, a drenched policeman stomping along the single gooseberry bush – lent such a sorrowful mood. "It wouldn't hurt to sleep a bit more and forget about this sad scene," he decided. He was already turning, as was his habit, onto his right side when he suddenly woke up.

Having woken up from an uncertain sleep, in which he'd been dreaming of waking up from a strange dream, as if he'd turned into a horrible insect in his sleep, and discovering that he hadn't turned into an insect at all – just that there was a cloudy day on the other side of the window, a lone policeman walking along a gooseberry bush, and him wanting to sleep a bit more – Vilibalds Bimberbaums saw that he had actually turned into a horrible insect in his sleep. Lifting up his head he saw a brown, vaulted giant insect stomach, lined with horizontal segments, which was barely covered by the edge of the blanket. All along the edges of his wide trunk, the feelers of his disproportionately thin legs fidgeted helplessly. It seemed like it could hardly be a dream. Gazing out the window, Vilibalds saw it was a gloomy, cloudy autumn day and that Juzefobijs was coming along the edge of the rain-soaked gooseberry bush, hidden in which was a lone policeman lying in wait for him. Wishing to warn his friend, Vilibalds tried to climb out of bed, but no matter how hard he fought to roll onto his side, each time he fell right onto his hard back again. "To hell with it," he decided, "Enough. Runs like crazy from darkness to darkness, doesn't have time to stare at the goggle-box, can't get a chance to leaf through a good book. And even so life isn't working out, always in debt, can't even manage to arrange a coat for the wife, walking around bare all winter long like that... Instead. Bags packed and away to the Great Land.

Won't be getting a lot of loot for the farm and animals this autumn, but it'll be enough to get by, maybe even enough for a modest, quiet business. To put on a suit again, to go out and meet people, to agencies, to exhibits, to smile and eagerly answer that everything is 'OK!' – to live again like a person, it's a done deal." A sudden sharp pain in his side. He jiggled around on his back, rested his head against the headboard of his bed and looked at the spot that was hurting. Gleaming through the greyish brown chitin cover, there was a pale, seemingly slimy, spot. He wanted to touch the tender bit with one of his little feet, but shivered in disgust and woke right up.

Vilibalds opened his eyes. His wife was standing in the doorway, completely naked. Her eyes and arms wide, her face wrenched in a ghastly grimace, she was opening and closing her mouth mutely, choking as she tried to get a scream past her lips. Instantly covered in a cold sweat, Vilibalds shot a nervous look at himself, because right before waking up he'd had a terrible dream where he couldn't and couldn't get over a nightmare, as if he couldn't wake up from a terrible dream about not being able to wake up. But no: two feet, two hands, stomach in the right place, everything his own. How lucky! Waking up in the morning in your own bed and seeing your regular self and a regular autumn day outside the window. Just in case, he pulled the blanket over his bare bits and anxiously looked over at his wife again. Still rigid with horror, his wife was stepping backwards through the door. But behind her back, holding the gooseberry bush in front of him as a cover, the rain-soaked policeman was shiftily sneaking up on her. Vilibalds threw his hand up as a warning, his startled wife let out a deep "Oh!", and collapsed with a bang onto the threshold. The sound of her fall woke up Vilibalds.

His side was aching agonizingly. Through tears he looked over the wounded spot. Hair gone, coming out in tufts, red skin pulsing painfully. He whimpered, looked sadly at his wife lying in the doorway and wagged his tail. His wife jumped up, stretched out her arms, stretched out her fingers, and squeaked, "Help! Help!" Toddling backwards absurdly, her hind end pushed up onto the edge of the table, she fell backwards into the gooseberry bush. Immediately a wet and disheveled policeman lumbered out of the bush to help, quickly pulling a sausage link from his holster and aiming it as he fiercely squinted both eyes. Vilibalds turned away. "For what?" Everything got dark and he understood that he was about to die.

Vilibalds woke up in his bed in Australia after a long and restless night. "Can you imagine it!" he marveled. "All the things you get to see when you guzzle down tea endlessly. I should probably go and take a leak." He yawned broadly, sweetly – so broadly that it brought a smile to his face – he went to scratch his face, but to his surprise saw that instead of a hand he had a hard, short, veiny stump covered in a thick coat of fur with a semicircular hoof at the end, and he had the same type of hoofs on both feet and the other hand. "Well, huh!" He couldn't help but be amazed, understanding that he must have turned into a donkey because apparently he hadn't fully woken up yet. So for a moment he kicked around with all tingling fours, fully enjoying the sprightly vigour of his powerful limbs. Then he noticed that in the doorway, energetically concealing herself in the gooseberry bush, his wife was standing with a pistol in one hand and a steaming teakettle in the other, with the wet policeman staring over her shoulder, a sausage link in his teeth. Vilibalds livened up cheerfully, perked up his ears – saying, see, how dreams can go sometimes – stretched out his luscious lips and cheerfully heaved, "Ee-aw!"

"Stop! Stop! Stop!" his wife started to squeal hysterically. "It's already five, how many can there be?"

"Ee-aw?" Vilibalds answered back enthusiastically.

His wife recoiled and threw the teakettle. He managed to close his eyes and immediately a terrible pain seared his side, hot steam took his breath away, his head was spinning and he woke up.

Vilibalds woke up in the bush. His side and stomach were completely bound up. "So, I guess they did some work on me after all. It wasn't just a dream. Well, it had to happen sometime." He tried not to move and to think as quietly as possible because walking back and forth along the bush, actively looking around, there was a naked, if you didn't count the hat on his head, policeman with a teakettle in his hand at the ready. Vilibalds examined his wrapped-up stomach sorrowfully and noticed that one leg – the fifth from the bottom on the left side – was twitching reflexively. "Nerves," he thought. "It's from too much reading." From the door came the sound of dragging knocks and creaking, angry blubbering.

"Well, finally." Vilibalds almost rejoiced on seeing Juzefobijs dragging himself across the threshold and his wife, then the sudden realization that today this friend looked like nothing at all – like something hard to imagine, like a kiang or a kiwi, or maybe a kilt.

"Juzefobijs! You too?!..."

"Blurlurpuf." He guiltily grimaced, gestured, or shrugged something.

"Hands and feet up!" barked the policeman, jumping up all the way to the ceiling and from there shooting the entire contents of the teakettle into the bush. Vilibalds screamed in pain, gave up the ghost and woke up.

Having woken up, Vilibalds discovered that he was sleeping in his bed in Australia, but with muddy boots on his feet, a policeman's hat in one hand and a more real than real pistol in the other. Through the window a damp bush was already staring in. "No! Just not that!" Vilibalds nimbly pushed the barrel up to his temples, shut his eyes and shot the pistol's contents into his head.

When Vilibalds finally woke up, his head felt dizzy and his stomach felt nauseous. "I should at least go and take a leak." He wearily opened his right eyelid and from the corner of his eye saw that he had hair left only on his chest and sides, and his stomach was already shaved. Along the grey wrinkles of his skin, the odd flea would dart about back and forth, looking for a softer place to stick to. He grabbed at it angrily, missed, and the flea fled into the bush. From the bush, grabbing his behind with his hands, a disheveled policeman burst out, got down on all fours and bellowed "Ee-aw!" Splashing him with mud and brightly neighing, a black horse with a sausage link flapping around it galloped off on a white mare. Vilibalds wanted to run after them, but right at that moment his tail fell off. He swore crankily – "Pew! Pew!" – and woke up right away.

As soon as he opened his eyes, with all his strength Vilibalds threw himself sideways – biting dog's teeth snapping at his heels – made another amazing leap and darted into a crease in the blanket, and didn't move. His legs shook and his heart buzzed.

Scattering water drops, the bush staggered unsteadily across the room. A piss-soaked hat clenched in his teeth, a naked policeman followed bent over on tip-toe, shaking his hands around as if to quiet someone. A white mare was gleefully whinnying in the doorway and already beating its tail about playfully.

"No, no, not there, I don't want a sausage there!" Vilibalds exclaimed in protest and woke up then and there.

Having woken up in his room one morning, Vilibalds stood up in the doorway, pistol in hand, aimed and woke up. Juzefobijs woke up, grabbed the sausage link, and ran into the naked bush to jab at the flea. "Pew, pew!" – the flea whinnied roguishly, straightened its tail, pulled the policeman's kettle over its ears and woke up. The policeman, bent down in the hat, struggled, panted, hacked and whimpered, helplessly wriggling his disproportionately thin little legs about, avoiding touching the wound with them. His fur was coming out in clumps, just clumps. Vilibalds lifted up the sausage, carefully aimed it, clenched it tightly in his palm and the weapon woke up.

Vilibalds Bimberbaums awoke in some bed from a nervous sleep and discovered that he had transformed. Lifting up his head he saw before him a bloated, naked, brownish fleshy pustule. On the far slope of the swelling, as well as a bit on the side nearest to him, clumps of fur were pushing through. Beyond the tufts of fur on the other side, his torso split and continued on as two knotted sticks turned up at the ends, each crowned with five crooked lumps. Further up, each side of his torso had a thinner, more pronged appendage. These too were thinly fur-covered in parts. "What is it?" Vilibalds was painfully confused. "What, me?" He moved all ten of the short, stumpy feelers on his side growths and shivered in disgust. "I don't want any of this! Won't it ever stop?" And right at that moment it all stopped, and Vilibalds woke up.