

# The Year the River Froze Twice

by

Inga Ābele

Translated from the Latvian  
by Christopher Moseley



Norvik Press  
2020

Original title: *Duna* © Inga Ābele, 2017. Published by agreement with Dienas Grāmata, Rīga.

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Norvik Press Series B: English Translations of Scandinavian Literature,  
no. 83.

*A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.*

ISBN: 978-1-909408-61-6

Norvik Press  
Department of Scandinavian Studies  
University College London  
Gower Street  
London WC1E 6BT  
United Kingdom  
Website: [www.norvikpress.com](http://www.norvikpress.com)  
E-mail address: [norvik.press@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:norvik.press@ucl.ac.uk)

Managing editors: Elettra Carbone, Sarah Death, Janet Garton,  
C. Claire Thomson, Essi Viitanen.

Layout and cover design: Essi Viitanen.  
Photo by Marylou Fortier on Unsplash.

This book was published with the support of the Latvian Literature platform  
together with the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Latvia.



Ministry of Culture  
Republic of Latvia

## Summer Street

Curled up like a cat, the Pārdaugava district is snoozing under a hot July sun.

The lanes of Āgenskalns are the stripes on the cat's fur, winding and tangling under the trees and throwing broad, rustling shadows over the dusty gardens – 'Bees', 'Flowers', 'Honey'... then 'Lavīze's', 'Ernestīne's', 'Olga's'... When I finally find Summer Street after a long search, it turns out to be narrow and warm, as if split by a wooden knife in yellow plasticine. At the end of the street, around a grey rented house, the wind whistles and, shouting loudly, children are playing.

I leave the car in a line of others by the street door and go through the gateway into the yard, in the dazzling sunshine. In the staircase the windows are open, it's hot. The doors of the apartments – each with their own world of stories, smells and sounds. The house is silent, blown by the winds, warmed up by the summer, and yet it seems to be resounding; beyond this silence I sense the vibration of a beehive – as always in an apartment building, where dozens of lives are bound together in a single knot.

I have to climb to the fourth floor. Alongside the window you can see the darkening edge of a storm over the blue bend in the Daugava river.

The doorbell is powerful and purposeful, like lightning. The door is opened for me.

On the threshold stands a man of respectable age in bright linen trousers and a shirt. His grey hair, it seems, has just been ravaged by a nightmare or all ten fingers. His eyebrows, too, which lash whitely over his calm eyes. His prominent nose was burnished

copper-brown in the long-ago summers of his childhood and since that time it has not given up its sunburn.

He invites me in.

“Hello! Please – sit down.”

The apartment is tiny. From the entrance I can see through to the kitchen and a room which is piled up like a magpie’s nest with books, bits of paper, paintings, ribbons, mementoes. Imants Ziedonis, the writer, is looking at me quizzically and a little ironically from a magazine cutting on the wall.\*

I settle down in the only chair. He sits down on the bed behind the magazine table, folds his hands on his knees and begins a rapid, loud lecture about his book *Principles of Marshland Management*, speaking quickly, as if driven by someone, looking at the ceiling above his head, and when he occasionally stammers, it’s hard to understand him.

I can’t follow him, I fall into some sort of reverie at the point when he won’t stop staring. I’m not thinking of anything specific, I’m cogitating on old age and how it is to be old and control your flesh, I’m thinking about eyeballs in their sockets and bones, about the burden of meat that the skeleton carries around for years, a co-ordinated, living and fluid, complex mechanism, created to serve the six senses and the heart. The excess kilograms of the soul. And what is the history of all that?

The ecosystem, structure and functions of a marsh, the circulation of matter and energy in the biosphere, is what I’m hearing as I emerge from his scrutiny.

He notices my wandering, inquisitive eyes, and is irritated.

“Why are you looking like that? Look, it’s all described in my book. I don’t understand why you rang me. You do have my book?”

“I will tomorrow.”

I can’t say that I don’t have the book. And that it doesn’t interest me at all. I didn’t buy it when it came out, because it was hellishly expensive, and even now, when I looked up the book on an internet trading site, there was one copy of it and it was no cheaper. It had the author’s signature, the seller explained to me when I tried to beat the price down.

But he looks at me stiffly, just like a moment ago. I'm a stranger to him.

He has a hearing-aid in one ear. I realize I have to speak louder.

"I will tomorrow. Tomorrow. I'm negotiating on the internet."

"Oh, are you?"

"Really I wanted to ask you about something quite different."

"About what? I'm deaf in one ear – please speak more clearly."

Bending forward, I say right into his face: "About Run Hill Dune."

A rapid mental process goes on before my eyes. Sudden memories, like a gust of wind, discompose his brows, and his eyes are clouded by a shadow – he's no longer living by clock time as the change comes – he's in some other world.

Then he settles down like earth after rain, pulls himself together, and at once he is terribly vigilant.

"But my dear, what do you know about old Hill?"

Now it seems he finally really notices me.

I pull from my bag a little programme from the Riga trotting track from 1943 and show him the name. Jockey: Radvilis; horse: Run Hill Dune; the race number.

"Andrievs Radvilis. So, is that you?"

For a moment he's prepared to deny it. Startled, he wipes his nose with a big checked handkerchief.

"I thought you were interested in my book... I'm sorry, I didn't catch your name on the telephone..."

"Alise."

His gaze is penetrating; the gaunt, rough fingers of both hands move spasmodically like roots around the trunk of a pine tree, clenching and unclenching. I would like to follow where his thoughts are involuntarily taking him.

"I didn't catch your name, but why do you want to know about that horse?"

"I'm looking for material about the Riga Racecourse. So little of it has been preserved... practically nothing. But when people talk about the track, they can't get away from that name, Run Hill Dune."

“I can’t hear you. Old age, my dear, is a great misfortune that you can only avoid by dying young, and that’s a great misfortune too. I remember little about that time.”

“Tell me...”

“That horse has been dead for nearly a century now; you’ll have to be satisfied with that.”

I put an album of sketches in front of me and turn it towards Radvilis. The old man looks at the covers for a moment, incredulous.

“You were drawing him. For ten years,” I say.

He looks searchingly at me with narrowed, thoughtful eyes, before summoning the courage to immerse his fingers in the album as if into a fire. At first he takes fright, pulls them away. Then he carefully strokes the pages, touches the cardboard, sniffs the paper. The album contains bigger and smaller sketches, drawings, paintings, most of them dated and signed.

“This was supposed to be lost!” he asserts with a stiff smile, turning his head incredulously. “It’s not possible!”

I spread out one picture which is sketched in white chalk and charcoal pencil on a big sheet of brown wrapping paper, for which reason it has been folded into four for many years. The drawing rustles windily like an oak-leaf in autumn. A long table with people seated at it. In the background, behind the stove, a picture of Stalin. On the right side, in the light of a bare light-bulb, stands a horse, its head bent over some woman’s shoulder. The woman is pregnant; next to her on the table lies an automatic rifle.

“Funny companions – a pregnant woman and a rifle...” I say.

“Why not? Padeigs had a Madonna with a machine gun.\* It’s a composition.”

“Strange – why a horse, indoors?”

“The horse is the wings of the human being, and she always has wings. There’s plenty there, my dear – some made up, some real. But that’s not the main thing.”

“How come?”

“Thundering. That was a time of thundering. You understand?”

I nod.

“Although – how could you understand?” He sighs. “You can only imagine it.”

Radvilis perfunctorily shoves the drawings into a heap and closes the covers.

“I was frustrated with art. It’s all so imperfect. You always have to think up something more.”

“What about with life? There are thirteen at the table.”

“What?”

“Who was the betrayer?”

“That’s not important any more.”

“Why did you stop painting? Because of her?”

Radvilis tries to take back the album, but I’m quicker.

“Please, give it back! It mustn’t get into strangers’ hands. That wasn’t the intention.”

“All right, but first you have to tell me...”

“What?”

“About these drawings. What can be seen in them.”

“But in art, everyone always sees themselves. Give it here!”

“Is that the Postwoman?”

He turns pale.

“Now go away! Right now!”

Suddenly as sprightly as a boy, the old man makes for the door, driving me out.

I place myself in the door-frame with my back to the flooding sunshine. The sketchbook is pressed to my chest. This is my last chance.

“We said on the telephone that we’d have a coffee in town!”

On his face, loathing contests with the afterglow of worry about his difficult nature, the imminent farewell and his loneliness.

“Shall we have a coffee?” I say, so that it thunders through the stairwell.

After a moment’s reflection, he nods. Resistance has worn him out.

“Everything in life is decided by women,” Radvilis mutters with dissatisfaction, pulling on his jacket. “They always get the last word. At least it’s always been that way in my life.”

Hot. Windows, doors open. The steps glitter under my feet. I run through the present, I run through the summer, I outrun myself anywhere and everywhere. What is the span of time after which the landscape stands before your eyes as memories? Is it long or short? Why is there no refuge anywhere?

“Nowhere, never,” the stairs thunder under my heels. My eyes squint in the sharp light and the icy shadows, a sudden fear of the future grips the back of my neck. “Bang!” goes the street door. After a moment he comes out, gaunt and silent. A little knapsack on his shoulders, a jockey’s cap on his head, but that’s his style.

Along Vasaras iela, Summer Street, we go, shoulder to shoulder. All the time he’s trying to keep next to his sketchbook, which I have like a faithful dog under my arm. A slow wind on the fences ruffles the furry Virginia creepers, and beyond them one can glimpse the ancient, half-collapsed walls and the private houses full of age and experience.

“Without anyone knowing, Lieutenant-Colonel Friedrich Sommer lived out his life here,” says Radvilis, waving at some house beyond the fence. “You will have heard of his son, the lily-grower Jānis Vasarietis?”

I nod my head vaguely.

The only café, on the corner of Camp St. and Woodcock St., is sunk in half-twilight, with a milk chocolate colour. The gaunt figure of Radvilis, waiting for me, melts into it. The aroma of chocolate wafts around the freshly baked cookies, the agile, stout elbows of the women and the stooped heads of the men.

He stands looking at me, so serious, a little solemn. Perhaps he thinks I’m cruel. The sketchbook is still under my arm.

At one with the whole world, there we stand. And yet each of us separate, with our own – distant, incomprehensible – feelings.

“Two black coffees, please! And two white cream-cakes,” I say.

On the terrace outside on the corner between the floral wall and the brick masonry is a heating flue for the winter season, on which is written *inferno*, so helplessly pale in the August heat. We sit down under it.

Meanwhile a thunderstorm is lumbering along Woodcock St. towards us, overtaken by a rapid tram, bringing clouds of dust

with it. High in the sky, something like the composition before us on the table is moving against the wind – black, seething and light-headed, whipped cream. Here on the ground it is barely noticeable, only occasional gusts of wind like stray hands stroking the terrace with a feather, and the canvas roof shudders.

“You know, I wouldn’t say no to the chance to look at another world in the near future,” says Radvilis, looking heavenward. “Life is beautiful, but I’ve lived mine.”

Confused, I ask him about his book. Momentarily enlivened, he declares that he could buy his time and extend his time, and as he simply loves his field to the depths of his heart, he starts telling me the principles of the science of marshes.

The different ecological structures and biotic interrelations... The qualities of the micro-relief of a bog... The influence of mechanical stress...

“Lately I’ve been most interested in the false seasonal changes in marsh pine trees,” he states, pinching at his cake with his teaspoon. “In the published studies one comes across contradictory information about the possibility of false, unnatural seasonal changes in conifers that grow in Europe. It’s been found that in conifers growing in the cool and mild climate of Europe, and in those that grow in unfavourable conditions, false seasonal changes don’t usually happen. Other studies have been published, though, that indicate false seasons in pine trees that grow in bogs...”

“Where were you at the end of the war?”

He doesn’t catch my words, and leans forward.

“I didn’t hear you. The volume is good, but I didn’t catch it. You don’t have good articulation. I’m surprised! You’re a journalist, your articulation must be correct, clear. But it isn’t!”

Where did he find out I’m a journalist?

“Where did the war end for you? For *you*?”

The German tourists at the next table stop chewing and glance at us.

“In the the fortress of Kurzeme,” he murmurs, suddenly grown quiet. “Where else?”

“And the filtration? Where did you go through filtration?”

“There wasn’t any filtration. Not everything in the world is black and white. There’s also the marsh.”

He pushes the chair back and gets up. He bows, I don’t know what for – for the coffee he has drunk, for me, or for his own disappointment – raises his cap and goes away.

And what had he been expecting? That we would only talk about high and low marshes while we drank our coffee?

At this moment the wind stretches out on the canvas of cloud and blows out its cheeks. It’s a wild current that carries that old man away from me along the dusty vortex of the streets. This ship is half-wrecked. Undeniably well-built and full to the gunwales with experience, still proud and fiery in spirit. Where can one travel in it? The name of the current is Time, and that leads in only one direction – no return tickets are available.

I run up beside him and unfurl my umbrella.

“I’ll walk with you – it’s going to rain!” He no longer believes me, glances at me as if at a stranger, and continues on his way. I grasp his hand.

“I’ll wait for your call, you hear? Please ring me! I’ll be waiting, I’ll keep waiting.”

He nods unconsciously and, overtaking me, carries on his way. His neck retracted into his shoulders like a tortoise’s. With the time he has lost, he’s also lost the necessity to serve another’s needs.

We are two independent dwellers in the marsh, who unfortunately owe each other nothing.

It starts to rain. He takes shelter and waits under the big elm at the Vasarietis house. So we stand awhile looking at each other. A car whips up a shower of gravel that clatters against the metal, while the rain pours down. Here is a man who, just like Lieutenant-Colonel Sommer, has lived out the end of his days on Summer Street, unobserved by anyone, but, unlike the lieutenant-colonel, doing it without honours or shiny medals, and wanting to leave this world – without a plaque on the wall of his house. Without a page in the history books.

But does that mean without memories either?

He was good to me and obliging about everything that didn't concern the past. It's commendable that the old man is resolved to live in the present, but am I guilty if I'm interested in his past?

I ring him a few more times. But when he realizes who is speaking he always falls silent and hangs up.

I mustn't wait too long. I remember the misfortune with the garages at the racetrack. I knew they contained boxes of valuable material. For too long I hung around, observing the garages changing hands, like high-class floozies choosing ever more exotic lovers. I should have broken in, even broken the law – I'm convinced of that now.

When I went away, it was a rainy April, and even from afar the scent of damp smoke assailed my nose – it made me sick at heart.

"You've come too late, Missus," declared a man with a Russian accent, standing by a pile of ashes with a rake in his hand. "It's all burned up."

"But don't worry yourself," he continued, noticing me reaching out to steady myself. "There was nothing valuable – just some old photographs on thick cardboard."

Seeing that this is no help and I'm becoming even paler, the man consoles me: "There was nothing valuable in the pictures either, just some horses and the race-track, just the Hippodrome."

I mustn't wait too long.

Yet I wait all autumn. And I've given up hope.

It's a black and damp snowless December when I spot the old man's name again lighting up the display on my mobile phone. For some reason I've picked up the phone, held it in my hand and waited for something. Perhaps at that moment, just as intently, he was looking at his own, and called my number, with firm intentions.

But perhaps we have both planned this call carefully and at length.

"Good evening. It's me – Andrievs Radvilis. How are you?"

My heart pounding, I reply that I'm well.

"Are you still interested in Run Hill? Might we meet tomorrow?"

"Of course. What time, and where?"

“I’d be pleased if we went out before dawn.”

I agree without asking where we’re going.

We fix a time to meet, before five in the morning.

“See you then,” I say.

“See you then,” he replies.

And he puts down the phone without ending the call. I continue listening. He sighs – his breathing is heavy, as if from the depths of a mountain. A bed squeaks, the receiver echoes a hollow rumble, the reverberations are slow and seem deliberately delayed, as if playing with the intervals. I realize that I’m hearing the beat of the old man’s heart. Apparently he has lain down, his veined hands clasping the phone resting on his chest. I hang up.

After a moment I’m rewarded again. Sunset beyond the panes – as silent as a pink paper kite, caught in the hard, black branches of the oaks by the Daugava. The explosion of colour lasts only some ten minutes; after that everything pales and vanishes.

I fetch Radvilis’ sketch album and leaf slowly through it. His drawings manage to capture activity. The lines are fine, nervous; a shadow seems to linger around the silhouettes. His jockeys on the track heave from side to side, but for the war horses the wet pen turns in rings, like constellations or a sprouting rye field. Of Radvilis’ works, two ink drawings stand out: one a portrait of an old gentleman with a gaunt face and delicate features facing the viewer, and Radvilis’ portrait of what is evidently the same person in profile – the head bent, the jaw muscles clenched in a bulldog bite. Both ink drawings are signed with the initials *B. f. E.* Then there are some pastels on black cardboard, in which you sense that Radvilis was trying out the style of the artist Voldemārs Irbe. There are sketches of the Daugava – flood-lands and a road, tussocks of grass, clusters of bushes and airy clouds above them – the lines stretch from infinity to infinity. In several of the ink drawings the war can be seen: garrisons, soldiers and the injured. Cripples too – people without legs and arms, solitary bedridden amputees with medals pinned to their chests and huge, otherworldly eyes. Their expressions are a curse that will pursue what they have seen to the end of their days.

For a long time I study the face of a much-sketched woman. Radvilis was a talented portraitist. Nothing about this woman is known to me, but what I see is contradictory, it doesn't add up. A delicate girl in a folk costume and white shawl, like the Russian painter Vrubel's swan princess, only the wings are missing... But in a sledge on a frozen river by the light of a full moon, with her hands upturned, she flies like a Valkyrie. A depraved boozing bitch with a heated expression, pictured with bare elbows and loose-hanging plaits, with vodka-drinkers in the background. Most of all I am fascinated by a drawing in which she is washing her hair in a forest, in the waters of a black marsh. Her hair is long and bristling, like a thicket of May roses, her face is as pale as moonlight, and her hands scratched, her expression gentle, questioning. On the other hand the face of a Soviet woman at a meeting at a long table is already burned like a Moor's in the summer sun, her white teeth flashing fiercely. Her expression has changed too – it is tired and malevolent.

In the morning I wake up well before the alarm clock rings. I stand silently in the room and I can't understand whether this is a dream or reality around me.

The night wind receives me in its cool hands as I leave by the familiar stairwell. He promised to wait for me, but there's no-one outside.

In the stairwell the lonely radiators wail. Bright rays of light pour from the old man's room as from a spaceship. Slowly I approach Radvilis' open door, stair by stair, until I catch sight of him down on his knees in the depths of the flat, writing something on a white page.

"Good morning!" he calls as he notices me, booming deep into the sleeping building. "I have to arrange some papers that might interest somebody. You understand, I'm an old man, I might die at any moment."

"Do you live alone?"

"I have relatives, but it's easier for them without me, thank God."

Having again dived into some drawer, he continues to pile up documents.

Then he gets up and announces, "We can go."

Radvilis puts a rucksack on his back, and jams a jockey's cap onto his head.

"My Papa always wore hats," he explains, as if feeling guilty, looking into the smoky hall mirror. "I only bought my first jockey cap when I couldn't find a proper hat."

Thereupon he proudly raises the collar of his jacket.

"This suit is from 1938, made in England. No-one else in Riga has one like it. Dad's suit."

The garment is dark blue with delicate pin-stripes. The elbows of the sleeves are worn to a preposterous sheen, but he doesn't notice that.

"Can you smell something?" Radvilis looks around the kitchen. "Is the gas turned off?"

He takes up his smoking equipment and takes a long farewell look over his dwelling.

In the car, Radvilis is unable to settle down, clutches at the safety belt and sighs guiltily. I help him and ask: "May I know where we're going?"

It's difficult to settle the old man in, as he twitches in his seat like a wolf-cub.

"First let's drive to the race-track," he says conspiratorially, observing me.

I nod happily, and off we go. Under cover of night the city seems different, a mysterious, empty place. Bulbs illuminate the shop windows, the damp asphalt swishes under my tyres, we are alone in the whole wide world. The Daugava is sleeping under the bridge like a lazy black ooze, not woken by the light before dawn. At night the car seems to run faster and all distances are shrunk by half. In the colonnade of high buildings along Valdemāra Street, darkness reigns, only an occasional light burns in a window.

"This is where Valdemāra Street used to end," Radvilis says, becoming restless. "And Vāgnera Street began – hard to believe, isn't it? Charlottenthal, or Charlotte's Valley, was once a wide plot of land that went up to the town's pasture-land. Until the twenties of the last century, the property belonged to the heirs of Wagner, the landscape gardener and nurseryman. There was a botanical

garden, with tropical plants growing in the orangeries. After the republic was established, the land on the estate was parcelled into building plots and the network of roads called Nītaure, Aloja, Zaubes, Mālpils and Tomsona sprang up. Around these streets in my youth was the biggest new-built high-rise housing estate in Riga. My Dad built here too.”

As we pass the corner of Mālpils Street, the old man points to the left.

“Here,” he says.

We get out by a sporting complex illuminated by little globes, like an interplanetary craft. Radvilis steps into the middle of the road.

“Now we’re standing on the track.”

It’s difficult to imagine a dust-covered track in a place completely covered with asphalt, glass and concrete.

“There, opposite, by Grostona Street, were the stands. They had burned down by the time the race-track closed.”

“In what year?”

“Hard to say. I arrived here in May of seventy-eight, the stands were still there then. After that, when I returned in eighty, they weren’t there any more. Sometime between those dates they burned down. It’s built-up land everywhere; it used to be very low-lying. Veseta Street in those days ran along the avenue; one side of the avenue is still preserved, you see? Where the kindergarten is were the old stables, built with sturdy wooden beams. At the end of the field was a tree – it’s been standing since ancient times.”

We come up to a stout, wind-blown willow. Dewdrops twinkle on its dark branches. At the end of the new multi-storey block, a children’s play area has been installed.

“This used to be the outflow of the Sarkandaugava River – to get to the race-track you had to cross little bridges. Over there, up-river by the Institute of Traumatology, there were always boats drawn up on the bank.”

I try to imagine the stream, the horses running along the track, and the boats on the bank. Once again in the former stables stand former jockeys, now racing in the Hippodrome of Eternity. The shadows of the jockeys, the trainers, the grooms,

the administrators and the audience are stirring; the apparently reserved, cool silence is overwhelmed by a thunder from the passionate stands, the wind-rustled, dusty prize rosettes on the riders' bridles, the normally unimpassioned people pay their money and cheer, watching their favourites on the track. The racecourse is not only entertainment but hard everyday work. A unique place with its history, its special events and its own language.

“The race-track is a purifying place,” says Radvilis.

He is seated on the illuminated solitary children's swing and, clutching the chain, considering something.

“Did you know that the ancient Greeks and Romans purified the horses from evil after the military processions? They believed that speed can purify, just like fire.”

After swinging a couple more times, he continues: “You know, that's the truth.”