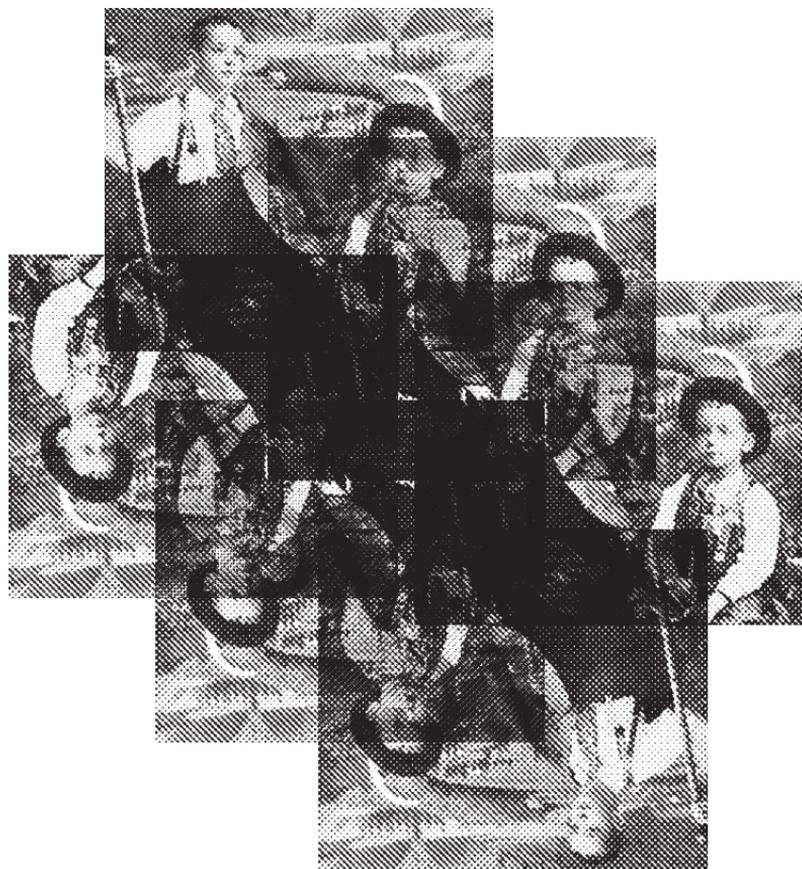


Artis Ostups



GESTURES

Translated from the Latvian  
by Jayde Will



## REACHING OUT

Artis Ostups' third collection of poetry, *Žesti* (*Gestures*), is one of the very few Latvian poetry books I have in my small apartment with a single, crammed bookshelf in St. Louis. Sometimes, when it is already dark, I take it with me in my bed to flip through its pages and read one or two poems just to refresh myself after reading on world-systems analysis and Planetary Modernism. This book has become for me a symbol of Latvian contemporary poetry as I know it and love it.

Every new generation of Latvian poets has tried to avoid the claustrophobic existence of “small literature.” This is a life that happens in a rather small and predictable poetic scene where everybody knows everybody else and where everybody always feels slightly frustrated by the vague feeling of things happening too slowly, too narrowly, too repeating. Whenever you attempt to be a flâneur who loses himself in an evening crowd, you will meet an acquaintance and you’ll end up sitting at the same bar talking about your other acquaintances.

Ostups embodies for me the kind of poet who is simultaneously one of us and a stranger. Although born and bred in the Latvian poetic scene, he is constantly looking beyond its comfort zones and learning from the outside what he cannot learn from the Latvian tradition of poetry, which is itself usually defined as a chain of belated reactions to international modernism. Ostups acknowledges Rimbaud’s *Illuminations* as one of his sources of

inspiration, however, it is impossible to miss many other influences.

The spirit of the poems in *Gestures* seems to dwell somewhere in the period of *La Belle Époque*, drawing its energy from the capitals of the Austro-Hungarian, German, and Russian Empires, giving us imagined glimpses of their material culture, everyday habits, and mood in the streets as well as the particular etiquette of human relations. And just next to that, there is the first half of the 20th century, with its modernist and avant-garde art practices and social reforms. What unites both of these eras in Ostups' poems is their suppressed emotionality and fragmentary nature: we see a world we are somehow longing for; at the same time it remains always alien. The principle of defamiliarization, formulated by Russian formalist Viktor Shklovsky in 1917, is here both a poetic strategy and a gesture itself that speaks to the circumstance of its necessity.

Ostups belongs to the new generation of Latvian poets who are passionately interested in modernist poetry. Their utopian project might be described as creating modernist Latvian poetry that would be both contemporary and past-impregnated – as if they were nostalgic about some trends in Latvian literary modernism that never came to be one hundred years ago. As if there was something deeply wrong with Latvian poetry without acting on these trends. As if there were a painful necessity to overcome both the contemporary nationalist stereotypes of Latvian public discourse and the limitations of Soviet occupation, when modernism was wildly combated by the authorities.

This book makes me sure that this vision is not impossible. I believe in the world created in the long poem “Three Photographs,” one of Ostups' most striking works. I see Franz Kafka, Walter Benjamin, and Artis Ostups all meeting as children. Artis would let Walter hug his little monkey while

Franz would put his big Spanish hat on Artis' head. I see these gestures transcending time and space, if only for a moment. And I can return to my World-systems analysis, and read about the core, the semi-peripheral and the peripheral literatures, the latter's endless dependency on what came before.

Kārlis Vērdiņš  
*St. Louis, 2018*

## AFTER REGAINING INDEPENDENCE

When we left the church, stars gathered around the moon's crumbled horn above the red cornice of the post office, seen through greasy glasses. My mother wore a black felt coat – winter pulled chalk across it like a schoolboy on a blackboard. Later I drew gates on my bedroom wall, while the plaster bust of a woman observed me from the top of the closet. Did the far-off clicks – from the railway and the highway – give hope for a different, more vast landscape? The gardens burned with a cawing, raven-black flame.

## GESTURES

A fallen glove points to narrow tables abandoned in the sudden rain – they stand in a semi-circle around the small Italian restaurant, waiters darting about in the windows. As far as the gray glass allows one to surmise, their shirts are white as snow, though they have lost their envelope stiffness. One could only guess how the art of a glove, this orphan who has lost the tender hand of a woman, will be influenced by the blind and hurried footsteps of the evening. Not far away, swinging up to the roof, bare branches become fingers trembling in hatred, as if preparing to strangle someone. This, it seems, is jealousy for the tower's crown – a nest for long shadows, which on sunny days describe a buzzing street and attract the glance of a flâneur. Like a pleasant change – the bird's coat of arms on the reverse of the branch bundle with wings stretched out in a drenched greeting.

## AFTER RILKE

– everything will remain partially unsaid, but once someone wrote – my chest is like a lamp, lit up by a look, and it truly did shine for the pleasure of cicadas, as I inhaled the nightly scents of the mountains. Now the cracked screen, snowy like after a heavy blow, shows a raven stuck in oil and a lyre with frayed nerves – a marked-up sheet of paper, tossed in the grass, and me myself like paper as well – burned halfway, but my eyes will stay silent. What once was music and light, tones and cascades, is now a faint whisper and the lighter flame – look, it's going out in the last muse's face – before she comes and cuts –