

Miia Toivio



Miia Toivio at the project's second production workshop

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Miia Toivio, born in 1974 in Ilmajoki, Finland, is an author living in Helsinki. She co-founded the publishing house Poesia, is active as a literary critic, columnist, editor of the poetry magazine *Tuli & Savu*, and a creative writing teacher. Her fourth poetry volume *Sukupuu* (Teos 2019) won the Nihil Interit Prize for the best poetry volume. She was awarded the Eino Leinon Prize in 2021. Her poems have been translated into Lithuanian, Estonian, Russian, Italian, and Norwegian.

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Miia Toivio

You are an oral Poem

Translated from Finnish by Kasper Salonen

Dear silly,

You are an oral poem, you are a poem that fits well in my mouth and you are a completely kissable poem. Smooch. Kissability, I mean out-loud verbal traditions usually refer to poetry that is born without literacy, orally sung, told, and remembered. You are not oral in that sense because you have been written via a word processor and sent to another country through digital technology and an invisible web, and no anonymous author has invented you and you haven't been sung in the corner of a cottage or listened or repeated or assimilated and walked over to the neighbors' house and re-sung there, but as something different and yet memorable; and on another night you would have been tasted and some third party would have been enamored by you and made you their own and taken you home and said, shall we sing a bit and then there would be more singing and listening and assimilation and otherwise-remembrance, but no, you haven't traveled in that way, you have not circulated from mouth to mouth, ear to ear, gradually changing your form, and so you have not tripped through centuries in the bodies of your singers and listeners from one place to another; instead you have emigrated in a matter of seconds, from person to person, in this case from Helsinki, Finland to Cologne and Berlin, Germany, and there you have been read by eyes and encountered in the hollows of mouths, and during spring 2022 you have come to be practiced by mouths, embraced by mouths, carried and performed by mouths. You are a written poem that mouths adopt.

Your origins are in my yearning to that cultural experience where singers carry poems in their mouths like animals carry their young. I have pined for the contact with that Fenno-Ugric poem-singing tradition that I have missed as a textual poet. Such a culture has not existed for at least a hundred years. The place of writing has moved, changed. Poem-singing as an oral skill has disappeared, poetry has made its nest in written culture and contemporary poetry has grown from the textual tradition. Poem-singing is still taught at the folk music faculty of the Sibelius Academy, but the teachers and students are not called poets, they are musicians instead. As I understand it, they also do not actively produce original poetry, opting to study and sing the tradition recorded in the folk poetry archives.

You, however, dear silly, silly-billy, are an oral poem, which to me as your writer means: a poem wherein the vocal and rhythmic qualities of language, the crystallized bodily sensations

created by a poem, have guided the writing. You are not a Kalevala poem, but an experimental and multidisciplinary one. Your roots are in the historical avant garde of the early 20th century, especially in sound poetry. I have always enjoyed your kind of poetry the most: poetry where the musicality of language engulfs the text and catches expression in its embrace. Ja spins around! It's poetry whose vocal and rhythmic forms emerge, attracting the reader's attention and making them move. Poetry that is born foremost as a phonetic creature, listening to and munching on language. Not much poetry in this vein is currently written in Finnish, which is a shame. That is another reason I am glad you exist.

Oral writing has also taken a backseat in my own work for some years. It is ten years since the poetry collection *Suut* (Mouths, Poesia 2012) by myself and poet Marko Niemi was published. The phonetic nature of poetry in *Suut* was highlighted by both methodological and, pardon the phrase, traditional writing. The poems and their subjects were born using computer programs developed by Marko, through which masses of text were run creating certain "results" that we then honed. We also relied on various restrictions to aid in our work. In addition, we wrote from our personal perspectives, using the tangible feel of writing to our benefit to bring forth phonetically and rhythmically highlighted poems. Marko was chiefly in charge of the texts brought out via computer-assisted, methodological, and often tightly restricted means, and I wrote more freely, with only some constraints.

During the years surrounding *Suut* we performed together on numerous occasions as the duo Miia & Marko, investigating the possibilities of oral poetry, performance, and dialogical expression. Then, suddenly and heartbreakingly, Marko passed away in autumn 2019; I lost a close friend and collaborator, and my work with poetic orality was interrupted. The project spurred by Lettrétage and sprechbohrer provided me with a renewed, collaborative opportunity and approach (including the inspiration!) to question and test my own skills in writing oral poetry.

My first creative idea concerning you, Dear silly, was therefore the desire to invite the oral back home. To call it back into my own mouth for the purpose of creating poetry. So I relied on personification, an "enlivening," and imagined the mouth to be a sentient being that I could invoke in the same way that cows are keened back to the byre from pasture. I had the chance as a child to witness old-fashioned country life, composed of small farms and villages, since my grandparents kept about twenty cows in a stanchion barn. In the summer the cattle spent their days on the pasturage near the house, from whence they were called back in for their evening milking. My memories of my grandparents' vocalized summonings are dim, but I know that herding calls [Translator's note: sometimes called *kulning*, *lalning*, or *kauking* across Scandinavia] are an integral part of Fenno-Ugric traditions of oral poetry. In my mind I connected the start of my own process to this same tradition, and that is how the first poem in the series *Rakas hupsu* (Dear silly) was born.

The newest and hardest part in writing you has been that I've had to compose you as a musical score, and for three voices. Writing you has been an extended learning experience, because I haven't been able to bring you into existence using my old familiar methods. You are the first poem that I am writing with the main intention of being performed and heard. And yes: three voices, wow! It feels to me like those voices are like three characters stepping along their own paths in a shared garden, tossing a ball to each other, calling out to one another, listening and echoing. As for the space (or garden) that this three-way team play will create, I can't know that yet. When I do hear you out loud for the first time, you will be a surprise to me as well, foreign and familiar all at once.

Thematically you embody important things to me, which I want to take a closer look at presently. But first and foremost I want you to remind your listeners of what language feels like, what words feel like, what vowels and consonants feel like; so that your listeners will remember the mouth, their own mouths, and the things mouths can do. How incredible is the being that we carry in our mouths and in our minds, and the delight that it can bring. And how that creature exists in poetry especially, and what power it carries within it.

It is worth remembering and probing the poem "Sydämeni laulu" by national author Aleksis Kivi, from his seminal novel *Seven Brothers* from 1870. When read aloud in Finnish, its soundful visionary fragments – such as *hietakehto*, *kellahdella*, *kuullella kehääjälintuu* – as well as its dark, dank ending phrase all bounce and sway. Recite it, and comprehend with awe that all the effects of this poem are composed of vowels and consonants, the way they organize themselves and are felt in the mouth. [Translator's note: Keith Boswell's English rendition is commendable, but delivers a different oral world performance].

That is the vibrant verbal mouthfeel that I want to discover and arouse in my own writing. It is quite hard to describe, and I've actually tried to do so multiple times in my notes. Below I will exhibit some of these attempts to wrangle and cuddle that experience of writing.

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So what sort of writing am I pursuing? Momentary surges of emotion that transports the poem, and myself within the poem; I follow along; and yet I know myself, I hold onto myself, in this unfamiliar ride where my feeling of myself is present in the words and phonemes that carry strange meanings. That is the emotion I am searching for, I reach for it and yearn for it, and I don't know how I will attain it, but by writing it happens and suddenly I notice I am once again in that mesmerizing moment.

When it happens, this this this feeling, this grasping onto language that makes poetry poetry, that truly separates poetry from other writing and other ways that people use to turn toward

the world, to experience and parse one's existence and relationship toward others – then I am exceedingly happy.

For this reason, I notice that in my own writing I've not been particularly interested in what my poems look like. The viscosity and typography of poetry have not drawn me in quite like tasting the poems themselves in my mouth. Sight is a sense of distances, and I feel that it alone cannot awaken the entire body. A poem as the subject of a gaze does not literally touch and move me in the same way as a poem as a audible and tangible creature. I also imagine that it is different to write from the mouth than to write from the eye, based more on hearing and touch than by relying on visual patterns and rhythms. I may of course be mistaken in this, and I may need to think about this again, even more.

But it is precisely that emotion, welling up through vocal repetition that is the onus and objective of my writing: feel, pressure, rhythm, sounds, and movement. This is about a kind of murmuring, as poet Vladimir Mayakovski described the onset of the writing process in his work *A Cloud in Trousers*. I believe that, at its best, writing poetry is a bend toward this murmuring, toward the boundaries of understanding, and that at its best a poem balances on that boundary, almost letting go of the reader's hand.

As per Mayakovski's description, writing a poem begins when words begin to cleave themselves away from the murmur. But for me the best experience in poetry writing is quite the opposite: words begin to melt around the edges, meanings dissolve, falling back first into formlessness and nonsense – all while remaining within the bounds of sense.

Writing poetry, to me, should always be about a return to murmuring. I don't know why, but that's how I feel. I barely concern myself with meanings, preferring the emotion of welling up that thoroughly rinses the formation of meaning. That is what I want out of writing; a wave that flips my insides upside down and back again; or perhaps that is reality itself that is opening, relinquishing and fracturing, morphing, and I don't even know which I'm addressing. But I know that I cannot help but being awed in the presence of these elements.

* * *

You, dear dear silly, are mindless, you murmur and sigh and echo, and I hope you are bumpity, lumpity, and plumbable, and everything that I want to bring back to poetry, revert, recreate, that humhumhum feeling, the thing that feels so good in all those U's.

U is an ice cream scopp, a hollow, a soft gelato.

Hold on a minute while I eat it up.

* * *

And finally, as some kind of conclusion, a final impression that I hope is also an emotable image. The mouth is a kind of cathedral, an echoing space where sounds tremble in waves and gather meanings around them. The more often one visits this cathedral, the stronger its effects become. The feeling grows. Your sounds scoop me again and again. That is why you, Dear silly, include so many mouths (Fin. *suu*). That home of the tongue. That closeness.

As my last remark I would like to say, I want to be like you, just as glad and energetic, enjoying life. After all, you were born out of my desire to rejoice and savor words and rhythms. To be cheerful and silly, even laughable. Tongue-happy! Then again I have also wanted to write out the sadness that the absence of a mouth that jibbers and jabbars out of sheer glee can produce.

I hope you bring joy to those who hear you, and give them reasons to rejoice and riot; and I hope the mouth returns to many mouths through you.