

## *Estonian Elegy: Forms of Mourning in Contemporary Poetry*<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract.** This article examines how contemporary Estonian poetry engages with the experience of death and mourning. Focusing on seven twenty-first-century collections devoted entirely to the loss of a loved one, it shows how bereavement generates distinct poetic strategies that reshape both the lyric form and the self. The study proposes a fourfold typology of mourning poetics: memorial, which sustains the presence of the deceased through memory and image; self-transformative, which charts the mourner's inner reconfiguration; displaced, in which grief is refracted into fragments, objects, or irony; and abyssal, where mourning resists narrative and dwells in a state of existential suspension. Through close readings of works by Triin Paja, Berit Petolai, Vootele Ruusmaa, Martin Algis, Peeter Sauter, Anti Saar, and Tõnis Vilu, the article demonstrates how Estonian elegy continues to evolve in the twenty-first century. Rather than resolving loss, these texts explore its paradoxes, transforming personal bereavement into a broader meditation on memory, temporality, and cultural identity.

**Keywords:** Estonian poetry; elegy; poetics of mourning; poetics of death

### 1. Introduction: The poetics of grief and estrangement

The loss of a loved one transforms not only the mourning self but the familiar world as a whole. Since identity and reality rest on habitual continuity that creates ontological security (Giddens 1991), grief unsettles these foundations and alters perception. As Andrew Mulvania notes, it disrupts life so radically that it can alter our relation to objects, time, nature, and identity itself (Mulvania 2021: 187–188). A similar point is made by Matthew Ratcliffe, who argues that bereavement reconfigures the very structure of our experiential world, altering how reality is disclosed to the mourner (Ratcliffe 2022).

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Poetry, with its capacity to articulate where ordinary language falters, arises at precisely such thresholds. It enacts what Viktor Shklovsky termed defamiliarisation (*остранение*), restoring immediacy to a world dulled by habit (Shklovsky 1925). Both grief and poetry thus estrange the ordinary, compelling renewed awareness. Roland Barthes confirms this affinity in his *Mourning Diary*, where he records his mother's death: "I don't want to talk about it, for fear of making literature out of it – or without being sure of not doing so – although as a matter of fact literature originates within these truths" (Barthes 2010: 23). The elegy becomes the locus where existential and poetic estrangement converge, a genre uniquely attuned to the dislocations of loss and transformations of subjectivity. This article examines how death and mourning are addressed in contemporary Estonian poetry through the lens of these questions – that is, how elegiac writing negotiates being, finitude, relationality and the continuity of self-identity in the wake of a loved one's death – and what kinds of elegiac modes articulate present-day bereavement.

Although originating in antiquity as a metrical form, the elegy in Europe came to signify lament and consolation. By the Romantic period it crystallised into a mourning mode shaped by ritualised structures. Yet, as Jahan Ramazani argues, modern elegy resists such consolatory patterns, developing instead the anti-elegiac mode in which grief remains unresolved (Ramazani 1994). Max Cavitch highlights the genre's duality: it records the most private losses while also pointing toward the commonality of mortality (Cavitch 2007: 1). Precisely this elasticity has allowed elegy to persist into the twenty-first century, accommodating divergent practices of mourning.

The lyric simultaneously embraces and resists narration, balancing the impulse to tell with the impossibility of fully articulating loss. Poetry, Charles I. Armstrong suggests, renders how trauma resists transparent representation (Armstrong 2020: 303). It becomes a vessel that takes on the singular contours of each grief. Derrida observes the paradox: "Speaking is impossible, but so too would be silence or absence" (2001: 72). Any attempt to speak of mourning becomes another enactment of it, reiterating its interminability. Mourning is both the object and the force of the work, each textual act at once seeking and resisting closure. Because mourning unsettles the very grounds of meaning-making, it also reopens deeper questions about the structures that underlie human existence. Anthony Giddens identifies four existential questions that structure human existence: the nature of being, the contradiction of finitude, the experience of others, and the continuity of self-identity (1991: 55). In mourning, when the mourner's sense of self falters and meaning collapses, these questions resurface with particular urgency. Elegy thus becomes a privileged site where existential concerns and poetic form converge.

Within this framework, the study turns to seven twenty-first-century elegiac collections that exemplify book-length engagements with the death of a loved one and have attained visibility in the contemporary Estonian literary field through awards or critical reception. Six are family elegies (three for a father, two for a mother, one for a son), and one addresses the suicide of a childhood friend. The corpus comprises the following collections: Martin Albus, *Paranemine* (Healing, 2021); Triin Paja, *Jõe matmine* (Burial of the River, 2022); Berit Petolai, *Hele, tuisklev, nimetu* (Bright, Whirling, Nameless, 2025); Vootele Ruusmaa, *Purgatoorium* (Purgatory, 2021); Anti Saar, *Puu põndakul* (A Tree on a Knoll, 2023); Peeter Sauter, *Märkmeid vaeste kirjanike majast* (Notes from the Poor Writers' House, 2012); Tõnis Vilu, *Kõik linnud valgusele* (All the Birds to the Light, 2022). These collections exemplify the ways in which death functions not only as a theme but also as compositional material, generating its own poetics (Bottero 2022: 325, 333). Accordingly, the study considers the specific strategies different authors develop to articulate this existential condition poetically.

Building on earlier discussions of elegy, the study proposes a fourfold typology of mourning poetics: memorial, self-transformative, displaced, and abyssal. Each orientation negotiates differently between the deceased's presence and the mourner's transformation, between remembrance, estrangement, and non-closure. The analysis explores how these modes shape contemporary Estonian mourning poetry, how they extend or resist the elegiac tradition, and how they construct the relationship between the grieving self and the absent other – whether through remembrance, inner transformation, metaphorical displacement, or depressive stasis.

## 2. Memorial mourning poetics

The two main axes of mourning poetics are time and space: the death of a loved one creates a rupture in the familiar spatio-temporal continuum, and the lyric self voices both emotion and altered subjectivity through a transformed relation to the world. In her collection for her father, *Jõe matmine* (Burial of the River, 2022), Paja's lyric self moves between childhood, when he was alive, and the moment of his death. This movement breaks temporal linearity, already enacted in the opening poem: "kajan, kuni ma pole enam hääl, / vaid peegel." (p. 7; "I echo until I am no longer a voice / but a mirror."). Voice unfolds in time – sound, words follow diachronically –, whereas the mirror marks space, synchronic presence, an image where everything is simultaneously present. On the poetic level, narrative corresponds to temporality, while image or fragment corresponds to spatiality. In mourning poetry, these principles remain in

tension: the spatial principle strives to overcome time, to reach timelessness, yet the temporal principle remains unavoidable in language – and in death.

This duality of time and timelessness appears in Paja's twofold poetics: most texts are in free verse, while some are prose poems. The latter rely solely on punctuation for pauses, whereas in free verse interruptions emerge in several ways. Linearity is first disrupted by the graphic arrangement: enjambment generates pauses within sentences and sometimes even within phrases. Notably, most of the mourning collections discussed (five out of seven), including Paja's, avoid capitalisation. Writing entirely in lowercase creates monotony but also equality: regardless of position or semantic weight, every word begins alike, and proper nouns are assimilated to common nouns. Unlike several others, however, Paja punctuates her lowercase verse, even placing full stops mid-line, further disrupting unidirectional flow. Semantically, interruptions arise through fragmentary, elliptical, and strongly symbolist expression:

*andestus ei ole vesi, mis peseks puhtaks  
isa näo. andestus tähendab,  
  
et piiblilehed, mida isa suitsetas,  
kasvavad piibelehtedeks  
  
ja ma näen nüüd merest kaugemale. (p. 20)*

(forgiveness is not water that washes clean / father's face. forgiveness means // that the bible pages my father smoked / grow into lilies of the valley // and now I see farther than the sea.)

Pauses here operate on three levels – punctuation, line breaks, and stanza divisions –, yet none coincide with syntactic boundaries, and this disjunction shapes meaning. The first line states a general truth about forgiveness: it does not render the forgiven innocent. After the pause created by the line break, the statement is applied to the father's face, shifting from universal to individual. On the same line, a positive dimension of forgiveness emerges, signalled by "forgiveness means". Before this meaning is revealed, a stanza break inserts a longer pause, a lyric intake of breath that heightens anticipation. Forgiveness then turns inward (the bible pages the father smoked) only to open outward into nature ("grow into lilies of the valley"). A redemptive metamorphosis unfolds: the desecrated sacred – the scripture consumed destructively – re-emerges as natural sanctity, the lily symbolising innocence, spring, and renewal. This meaning is heightened by euphonic repetition and homonymy in Estonian ("piibeleht", "lily of the valley" / "piiblileht" – "bible page"). The final

stanza break creates a decisive pause, ending with a new perspective: seeing beyond the sea. The sea, which itself is a symbol of infinity, is transcended: forgiveness opens even a broader horizon.

Repetition across temporal layers further unsettles linearity, as motifs and lines echo both within single poems and across the collection. In Paja's mourning poetry, nature becomes the primary spatial setting, gradually fusing with the figure of the father. These repetitions do not simply liken him to the surrounding world but redefine him as part of it, creating an enduring presence within the landscape:

*ta oli albiino-kärbsenäpp, kes möödunul suvel külas ringi lendas ja keda ingliks kutsusime* (p. 9)

(he was an albino flycatcher who flew around the village last summer, and whom we called an angel)

*isa oli vares varajases / lumes* (p. 14)  
(father was a crow in the early / snow)

*iga tuba oli kiiktool, milles kiikus isa. isa oligi hunt* (p. 8)  
(every room was a rocking chair in which father rocked. father was a wolf)

*isa on too vasikalaps tapamajas, kellel polnud enam silmi* (p. 15)  
(father is that calf in the slaughterhouse who no longer had eyes)

*isa suu on püssile graveeritud hunt* (p. 17)  
(father's mouth is the wolf engraved on the rifle)

Through continual redefinitions, father is reborn in each new image, simultaneously the same and transformed, affirming the ceaseless rewriting of life and death. Temporal and spatial boundaries dissolve; humans, animals, and things intermingle, and meaning shifts rather than disappears.

In all but one of the mourning collections discussed here, the death of a loved one is temporally anchored by explicitly marking the month of death, though in different deictic relations. In Paja's case, the reference point is another death – that of her grandmother: "isa lahkus kuus kuud / peale vanaema" (p. 13; "father departed six months / after grandmother").

Although dedicated to her father's memory, Paja's mourning poetry is less about recalling the past than about creating memory, bringing the father into continuous presence. Yet this is possible only through remembering, as the poem that gives the collection its title, "Jõgi" (p. 22, "River") points out: "peale surma oleme kõiges / mis mäletab" ("after death we are in everything / that remembers"). The enjambment pauses the line, stressing that living memory

grounds the deceased's universality. Repetition reinforces this continuity, including alliteration: "oleme / **kōikjal, kōrkja kahinas**" ("we are / everywhere, in the rustle of reeds"). The poem's closing lines reject burial altogether: "peale surma saame jõeks / ja jõge ei saa matta." ("after death we become a river / and a river cannot be buried.")

Although each poem stands as a discrete unit, together they form a conceptual whole, held together by recurring motifs that weave between free verse and prose poetry. Out of temporal rupture there unfolds a narrative that moves through memory and pain toward consolation and farewell. In the final two poems, the lyric self returns explicitly to grief, and here traces of traditional elegiac consolation appear. In *Mu lein ei saa leivaks* (p. 51; My grief cannot become bread), she writes against the absolutisation of mourning:

*valu vōib jumaldada, / aga selles koos elamine // tähendaks pimedaks jäämist, /  
soovides jumaldada üksteise silmi  
(pain can be worshipped, / but to live within it // would mean going blind, /  
wishing to worship each other's eyes)*

The collection closes with an almost manifesto-like poem *Mu kurbus ei saa kurjuseks* (p. 52; My sorrow will not become evil), where the refusal of grief's destructive power becomes a conscious act of forgiveness and kindness. Motifs of flight, lightness, and clarity dominate, echoing the opening mirror image but now transfigured into a vision of cyclical renewal:

*ja mu lein on vaid aeglane lehvitus.*

*isa nägu selgineb  
nagu järvepealne peegel.*

*ta naeratuse sirp  
pehmeneb tiivaluuks*

*millel kasvavad juba suled  
ja kohe,*

*kohe puhkevad ta tiivad õide.*

(father's face clears / like the surface of the lake. // the sickle of his smile / softens into a wing-bone // on which feathers already grow / and soon, // soon his wings will burst into bloom.)

In Paja's poetry, the figure of the father reappears in the flight of birds and the shimmer of light, his presence continually mediated through acts of memory. Her mourning poetics is thus best understood as a poetics of remembrance – one in which lyric language transforms absence into presence and sustains the dead within the living world.

A similar orientation emerges in the work of Berit Petolai (b. 1980), a nature-focused poet living in the countryside by Lake Peipus. Here the departed is not only sustained within the mourner's world but also more directly woven into present life and relational experience. Her poetry thus offers another example of memorial mourning. Her collection *Hele, tuisklev ja nimetu* (2025, Bright, Whirling and Nameless) carries a dedication that reads: "In memory and gratitude to my mother, who taught me to believe in the inexorable power of goodness and to see in small things the expansiveness of a fairy tale." (p. 5) This dedication frames the book in an apostrophic mode: the mother becomes the implicit addressee to whom the lyric voice turns, even when direct address is absent from the poems. Thus, the "you" in the title poem (p. 7–9) can be read as the lost mother, whose presence is inscribed into recurring images of the natural world, appearing, for instance, as a flight of swans across the grey autumn sky, as the drifting steam from a slumbering anthill, or as folds of mist across the field. The poem ends with a metapoetic turn that makes this apostrophic address explicit: "luban endale kõnelust sinuga, / sa hele tuisklev ja nii mitme nimega" ("I allow myself conversation with you, / you bright, whirling, and of so many names"). Petolai's collection, dedicated to her mother's memory, thus stages an ongoing dialogue with the Nameless, transforming the lost parent into a dispersed yet abiding presence. At its core, the book dramatises the central paradox of the elegiac mode: the impossibility of speaking and of remaining silent, of naming and of refusing to name.

Poetically, Petolai's collection is the most traditional among those discussed. She employs capitalisation and punctuation, her verse lines generally coincide with syntactic units, and she has described herself as a storyteller. The collection therefore foregrounds narrative, constructing a verbally imagined world in which folklore and tradition play a central role. As in Paja's work, absence and presence merge; yet in Petolai's case this merging takes the form of a folkloric continuity that binds people to their loved ones across time. The lyric self intertwines with maternal gestures – "Need liigutused. / Mu emale nii omased. / Siin, korraga minu ees. / Mu enese kätes." (p. 15; "These movements. / So typical of my mother. / Here, suddenly before me. / In my own hands."). This inheritance extends beyond her mother to her sister, whose gestures seem to flow through her, and to her father, whom she comes to recognise as part of herself (p. 21).

Petolai likewise anchors her mother's death by naming the month of her passing. Yet whereas Paja links loss to the previous generation through the figure of her grandmother, Petolai frames it in relation to the next, juxtaposing the mother's death with the birth of her daughter: "Ema suri. Äkitselt, jõulukuul. / Ja sündisid sina, tõttasid ajast veidi ette" (p. 23; "Mother died. Suddenly, in December. / And you were born, hurrying slightly ahead of time"). In this way, her elegiac poetics situates mourning within an intergenerational continuum, binding loss and renewal into a single temporal frame.

Petolai's collection is therefore not confined to commemoration; it unfolds as a sustained dialogue within familial and natural space, where presence and absence, the individual and the collective, continually interweave. The final poem is addressed to the child, underscoring generational continuity and affirming the persistence of life carried forward through stories, songs, and landscapes. The collection closes not with finality or rupture but with the line "kulgeb ikka edasi" (p. 156; "still goes on"). Death removes individuals, yet they remain as enduring links, transmitting heritage, custom, and memory across generations.

### 3. Self-transformative mourning poetics

A second orientation, which I term self-transformative mourning poetics, foregrounds the reconfiguration of the lyrical self in the wake of loss. Whereas memorial mourning poetics seeks to preserve the lost other through images, memories, and symbolic returns, this mode turns inward, charting the shifting states of the bereaved, whose voice and affect evolve over the course of the collection. Its focus lies less on sustaining the deceased in poetic form than on tracing how grief itself reshapes subjectivity. Mourning here becomes a mirror of self-exploration, with lyric writing recording altered perception, heightened vulnerability, and the labour of reorientation. This reflexive mode finds paradigmatic expression in the works of Vootele Ruusmaa and Martin Algus, both of whom respond to parental loss by mapping how bereavement unsettles, destabilises, and remakes the self.

Composer and poet Vootele Ruusmaa (b. 1988) dedicated his elegiac collection *Purgatoorium* (2021, Purgatory) to his father. In his own words, the book explores the enduring bond between father and son and the continuation of their dialogue beyond death: "Not only the deceased pass through purgatory – so do those left behind. I wanted to write this process as honestly as possible" (Kangro... 2022). The collection is therefore less a memorial to the father than a charting of the inner journey of mourning, tracing the gradual disintegration of the self and its eventual reconfiguration in new terms.

Ruusmaa introduces the theme of death in the opening poem, initially indirectly: in an image comparing the season's first frost to death's white shroud (p. 7). Thus, a description of external nature already marks the extent of the speaker's grief. As with other authors, the father's death is situated through temporal deixis – the time or month of death –, yet whereas Paja and Petolai linked it to another family member, Ruusmaa turns inward, binding it to the very moment of writing: "isa surmast on möödas pea kuu" (p. 9, "almost a month has passed since father's death"). This draws the reader into a present in which grief is still raw.

Unlike the other poets, Ruusmaa devotes several poems to the moment of dying itself, to the threshold between life and death, a liminal zone that simultaneously reflects the fractured condition of the lyrical self. In such passages, the self perceives its own identity as dissolving, an existential state where being and non-being converge: "mina selles öhtus olen / ja ei ole" (p. 9; "I in this evening exist / and do not exist.")

The speaker experiences a rift within, a sense of waking up "beside oneself", as if confronted with a stranger who is none other than himself (p. 45). Death is rendered through stark corporeal imagery – such as the description of the father's eyes from which emptiness seems to flow (p. 12), or the portrayal of his step across the threshold into darkness (pp. 14–15). The title *Purgatory* creates an image of the grieving process as a purgative fire and gestures toward Christian notions of penitence and forgiveness. The lyrical self gives voice to guilt and the impossibility of self-forgiveness – "su minek oli ja on minu elu suurim argus" (p. 15; "your departure was and is the greatest cowardice of my life") and "liigraske enesele andestada // graniidist süda peos" ("too heavy to forgive myself // a granite heart in my hand") (p. 34).

As in Paja's case, free-verse lyrical fragments alternate with passages of prose poetry. These prose sections are also marked by fragmentation, for instance, in the staccato description of the father's burial: "löikuspäev, sinu sängi asetamine. külm jaanuar, lumi, libedus..." (p. 37; "harvest day, placing you in the coffin. cold january, snow, ice..."), a form that mirrors both the fractured experience of grief and the disruption of temporal continuity. Toward the end of the collection, however, a more affirmative dimension of death begins to appear: consolation is not simply attained but paradoxically accompanied by the recognition that the world before the father's passing had already grown lifeless, and that his loss, in turn, renews vitality. This paradox is crystallised in the closing lines of one poem: "surm puudutas / paljutki elusaks" (p. 47; "death touched / much into life"). The existential finitude experienced by the self after the father's death is thus transformed into a new sense of expansiveness.

Self-transformative mourning poetics also finds expression in the work of Martin Alagus (b. 1973), an acclaimed playwright and screenwriter whose debut poetry collection *Paranemine* (2021; Healing) was shortlisted for the Cultural Endowment's annual poetry prize. The second cycle of the book confronts his mother's death and articulates a long process of inner change. Composed over five years, these poems map shifting emotional states that gradually coalesce into an elegiac mode of writing. Alagus himself has described the project as a literal journey through grief, sustained by emotional intensity and a commitment to honesty (Klein 2022).

As for the structure of Alagus's poems, their basic unit is typically the phrase. Neither line nor stanza length follows a predetermined pattern; instead, they adapt to the flow of semantic and emotional movement. Line and stanza breaks function rhythmically and semantically, creating pauses that guide emphasis. This is particularly evident in the poem depicting the moment of his mother's death:

*silitame tema pead*  
*räägime vaikselt*  
*õde*  
*isa ja mina*  
*kordame neid üksikuid sõnu*  
*mida öelda oskame*  
  
*armastan sind*  
  
*midagi muud pole enam teha*  
  
*pole vist kunagi olnudki*  
  
*ja lõug tõuseb hingates*  
  
*üles*  
  
*üles*  
  
*üles*  
  
*kuni*  
*tuleb viimane*  
*kõige lühem hingetõmme*  
  
*kõik jäääb vaikseks* (p. 88)

(we stroke her head / speak softly / sister / father and i / we repeat those single words / that we can say // i love you // there's nothing left to do // perhaps never was // and the chin rises when breathing // up // up // up // up // until / comes the last / the shortest breath // everything falls silent)

Here rhythm is shaped by the placement of line and stanza breaks, marking variable pauses and intensifying the emotional tone. The opening six phrases record the final evening with the dying mother, while the subsequent single lines and silences mark the suspension – and ultimate cessation – of time. Through this fragmentation and pacing, the poem registers both the intimacy of leave-taking and the rupture of loss.

The death of his mother is announced in the opening poem, in a manner strikingly close to Ruusmaa, marking both the act of writing and the month since her passing: “ema / suri kuu aja eest” (p. 43; “mother / died a month ago”). Algus’s collection thus unfolds as a diary of shifting states, chronicling grief across several years. In this respect it recalls Barthes’s Mourning Diary, though with a difference: whereas Barthes portrays mourning as a suffocating stasis, *Paranemine* stages a poetic journey of healing, one in which “everything must be felt through, step by step” (p. 71). Unlike the women poets discussed earlier, who connect parental loss to the continuation of the next generation, Algus’s lyric self turns his mother’s death into a means of rediscovering his own childhood experience:

*olin jälle laps  
seesama kes oli kunagi ema surma kartnud  
pidetu  
isekas  
kiindumust täis* (p. 44)

(I was a child again / the same who had once feared the mother’s death / without foundation / selfish / full of attachment)

A central motif here is the selfishness of grief: the pain caused by another’s death is experienced primarily as an egocentric condition. Barthes also notes this, describing suffering as “a form of egoism”: “I speak only of myself. I am not talking about her, saying what she was, making an overwhelming portrait” (Barthes 2010: 195). In a similar vein, Algus’s lyric voice stresses the primacy of the self over the addressee. As one poem confesses, “tegelen nüüd isekalt vaid iseendaga / ... / kuidas olla üksnes kurb / ilma kannatamata” (p. 52; “I deal selfishly only with myself / ... / how to be merely sad / without suffering”).

Death is experienced in strikingly material terms, the absence is inscribed into present objects: “köögis ootas lein / lambivarjudes ja aiakinnastes / nõudes ja kardinates / köiges mis oli emaga kokku puutunud” (p. 46; “grief waited in the kitchen / in lampshades and garden gloves / in dishes and curtains / in everything that had touched mother”). Metapoetically, Algus also reflects on the impossibility of language: once spoken, love and grief are “immediately false” (pp. 66–67). Paradoxically, the lyric self longs for the mother to be the one who might offer comfort in the face of her own death (p. 75); here again we see the self encountering the mother’s death as a return to childhood, a renewed experience of being a child in the face of loss.

Healing, however, unfolds through time. Relief is felt especially in relation to things: after a year, the speaker describes cleaning dust from a coffee machine, sensing how grief has eased and everyday objects now carry their own melancholy (pp. 64–65). By the final poem, several years have elapsed and he declares:

*ma  
olen kõik järgmõöda läbi tundnud ja kuskile jõudnud*  
  
*panen kohvi tilkuma  
masin hakkab lurisedes tööle  
/ ... /  
hallrästas pesa teinud  
pojad juba sulis* (p. 92)

(I / have felt everything through, step by step, and arrived somewhere // I put the coffee on to drip / the machine starts to gurgle to life / ... / the grey thrush has built its nest / the chicks already feathered)

Algus’s collection thus stages mourning as an existential experience of temporality: grief unfolds in the slow succession of time, in which the self is continually undone and reconfigured through objects, memory, and the texture of daily life. The book culminates in an emblematic gesture of renewal, closing with images of birds’ offspring – newly feathered nestlings that symbolise beginnings – so that the work ends not in stasis but in the promise of continuity.

#### 4. Displaced mourning poetics

In contrast to the memorial and self-reflexive modes, grief here does not appear through the sustained presence of the deceased or through the mourner’s transformation, but is instead diverted into images, fragments, and even irony.

Trauma, resistant to direct representation, resurfaces obliquely; mourning becomes legible precisely in its displacements and fractures.

Displaced mourning poetics is exemplified by Anti Saar (b. 1980), a writer and semiotician whose *Puu põndakul* (2023, A Tree on a Knoll) emerged from essayistic fragments composed in Paris shortly after his father's death. Initially intended for a literary journal, the texts gradually coalesced into a book-length manuscript. Saar emphasises the intuitive nature of both writing and illustration: each fragment is accompanied by an ink drawing(s) of a solitary tree, completed without revision – “when I start something, I usually complete it in the same gesture” (Talvistu 2024). Although formally presented as prose and even shortlisted for a major Estonian prose award, the book has also been read as a work of prose poetry, its hybrid form reinforcing the sense of dispersal and recomposition that characterises this poetics of displacement.

Although dedicated to his father, Saar's book takes the tree – not the father himself, who is named in only a fraction of the 68 prose poems – as its central motif. As David Biespiel observes, the elegy “seeks to make a metaphor from loss” (Biespiel 2023), a principle Saar enacts by displacing grief into the recurring image of the solitary tree, while the mourner's emotions are deliberately withheld, surfacing instead through imagery and tonal shifts. The tree, often figured as a ‘tree of life,’ is one of the most widespread cultural symbols. Of particular interest is how Anti Saar's displacement of mourning into the image of the solitary tree resonates with a poem by Estonia's major poet Jaan Kaplinski, written in the aftermath of his mother's death, which likewise evokes the act of drawing trees: “Keset aeda seisab ikka veel / paar raagunud puud – üks paju, paar uibut, / mida mullu üritasin joonistada, / kui oli niisamuti kevad ja ema / oli haiglas suremas” (Kaplinski 2000: 621). (In the middle of the garden there still stand / a couple of withered trees – a willow, a few apple trees, / which last spring I tried to draw, / when it was likewise spring and my mother / was dying in the hospital.) Both poets, in different registers, turn to the motif of the tree at the threshold of death, using it as a figure for memory, continuity, and loss.

The opening of Saar's collection introduces the father's death in a distinctive way: whereas the other poets mark loss through temporal references, here it surfaces immediately in the first text through the motif of inheritance (p. 3). Before either the father or his death is named, the speaker reflects on who has inherited what. The opening sentence situates him in his childhood home in Kavastu, though the house itself has gone to his brother; what he receives instead is a single childhood keepsake – a socket wrench – on which he pointedly remarks with satisfaction. The framing of inheritance sets the tone: death is confronted not with elegiac pathos but with sharp, ambivalent

fragments oscillating between cynicism and sincerity, leaving the reader to negotiate the register. Such ambivalence is central to Saar's poetics of mourning, shaping both its mode and its verbal expression.

The father appears as the very embodiment of order – ultimately of the symbolic order in a distinctly Lacanian sense – and the self's identity is repeatedly defined in opposition to him. He seeks to discipline not only the household but also the natural world, his ideal encapsulated in the image of "cleanly weeded garden edges, hedges and berry bushes, trimmed lawn, weeded and loosened apple trees" (pp. 28–29). His drive toward control extends further into the social sphere, where he writes critical letters to the major daily Postimees (p. 73). Yet this insistence on rigidity makes him incapable of ageing – a fatal flaw, since "successful ageing essentially means retaining youth's most important quality: flexibility, the ability to let go" (p. 64). The father is associated with the tree on multiple levels in this elegiac mode – one of them being his rigidity and, ultimately, his death. The book includes a single versified text, a quotation from Verse LXXVI of the *Tao Te Ching*, which draws a parallel between human death and arboreal decay:

A man is supple and weak when living, but hard and stiff when dead. Grass and trees are pliant and fragile when living, but dried and shrivelled when dead. Thus the hard and the strong are the comrades of death; the supple and the weak are the comrades of life. (Lao Tzu 1963: 138)

In one fragment, the father is explicitly likened to a falling tree: a mighty, many-branched poplar that gradually sheds its pale leaves before suddenly collapsing in full height – "That tree was my father" (p. 60). Elsewhere, the link between father and trees is mediated through the son. Just as flowers are said to grow from ashes in Triin Paja's elegy of mourning, Saar evokes a similar cycle of life: his lyrical self imagines trees sprouting from the father's remains, "Ja mina õitsetan tema põrmust puid" (p. 112; "And I blossom trees from his ashes"), a gesture that can be read metapoetically, both within the elegiac verse and in the accompanying tree drawings, which themselves figure as life emerging from destruction.

Through such imagery, Saar situates mourning within reflections on selfhood. If the father epitomises order and representation, the speaker resists both, insisting instead that while his father seemed respectable and representative, he himself represents nobody (p. 93). The self is often articulated through negation: the speaker admits to lacking both motivation and inner drive (p. 9), and even likens himself to nothing more than a shadow (p. 15). The wish for dissolution recurs throughout, figured as a longing to draw – or simply to be – without the burden of thought (p. 11). Grief repeatedly

destabilises the boundaries of subjectivity; as Judith Butler observes, mourning exposes the relational fragility of the self, undoing its coherence even as it constitutes it (Butler 2004: 22–23). The mourning subject longs to dissolve – he has become a shadow. The loss of self-sameness also entails that meanings in the text cannot remain fixed; they are undermined in many places through irony and even through the very act of writing itself, perhaps undermining existence as a whole: “For all of this is one great joke. I think: all of this” (p. 22).

The recurring motif of order and disorder, balance and imbalance, also functions as a reflection on the problem of remaining oneself while simultaneously relinquishing the self. Scribbling itself signifies a chaotic, hurried, and careless form of creation, yet it becomes a compulsive act, a kind of neurosis obsessively repeated from one fragment to the next (for example, “Sodida, sodida, sodida,” p. 12, “To scribble, to scribble, to scribble”). Repetition keeps the loss present without naming it directly, while at the same time exerting a paradoxically soothing effect, since “The pencil’s restlessness is the greatest peace.” (p. 34). Disorder is thus transformed into a paradoxical order, a neurotic yet soothing ritual. This obsessive repetition does not narrate loss directly but keeps it present, formalising absence.

The relation between the real world and its representation emerges as an existential question, one that is likewise tied to the problem of selfhood: memories that construct the image of the “I” through the past are not representations of something absent but rather function as “a presentation, here and now” (p. 4). In this sense, the written word and the drawn line do not merely express mourning but actively produce it in the moment of their inscription. Saar’s mourning poetics also includes fragments – texts consisting of a single phrase – that convey the mood of transience (“Maailm pôleb,” p. 113; “The world is burning”) and existential void (“Tühisuste tühisust,” p. 122; “Vanity of vanities”).

In Anti Saar’s work, grief is displaced into recurring metaphors, above all the tree, whose transformations sustain an oblique poetics of mourning. Peeter Sauter (b. 1962), best known for his prose, turned to poetry after the sudden death of his 21-year-old son Kustas, offering a different inflection of the same mode. At first he wrote long letters to relatives, asking them not to respond, while drifting in and out of dissociation – laughing, crying, “kind of faking real life”. This compulsive writing allowed him to move beyond paralysis, though the collection *Märkmeid vaeste kirjanike majast* (2012; Notes from the Poor Writers’ House) came only later, when, as he himself noted, he was already reworking those motifs into literature rather than speaking directly from raw immediacy.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Peeter Sauter, personal communication with the author [2023].

The book comprises sixty-four pieces. Kusti is mentioned around fifty times, yet never dominates a single section; he appears instead in sudden, fragmentary glimpses woven into other topics. The opening poem, for instance, begins with the speaker's description of a cosy suburban apartment with a crackling stove, until death intrudes in the sixth stanza: "kusti suri detsembris / talle meeldis tartu / ta surigi nagu supilinnas surrakse / lahja supp kõhus ja jalad paljad / koridoripõrandal sirakil / silmad klaasist /ihu pisut märg" (p. 8; "kusti died in december / he liked tartu / he died the way people die in supilinn / thin soup in his stomach and bare feet / sprawled in the corridor / glassy eyes / body a little wet").

The most traumatic image appears in Chapter 20. What begins as a simple meditation on house keys – "do you know / who has the keys to your home" – suddenly veers, by the tenth stanza, into the moment of the son's death:

*mihkel arvas et on hea  
et võtmed naabri-pehkil on  
mihkel ei saand sisse  
kui kustas röökis  
mõned minutid enne surma  
ja ei suut ust avada  
võtmeid oleks vaja läinud* (p. 53)

(mihkel thought it was good / that neighbour pehk had the keys / mihkel couldn't get in / when kustas screamed / a few minutes before he died / and he couldn't open the door / keys would have been needed)

This passage conveys not only the son's final moments but also the neighbour's horror at hearing his cries without being able to intervene. The obsessive return to the motif of keys, which at first seems a digression, is revealed as grounded in this traumatic scene. What appears a casual meditation is in fact organised by the impossibility of rescue and the helplessness of witnesses, an intrusion that anchors the poem's seemingly erratic flow. Yet this is not the work's culmination: in the following stanzas the text again drifts into everyday and imagined situations centred on the key.

Such sudden returns disrupt the text's surface. Although the book's subtitle designates it a long poem, it resists linear development: some passages take the form of diary notes, others break into fragments, and the whole evades the coherence of a psychological narrative. Rather than sublimating grief into plot or stable symbol, Sauter disperses it across quotidian notations, abrupt memories, and the deflation of pathos through blunt or even obscene speech. The dead son reappears not as a sacralised presence but as a jarring

interruption, and whenever the tone begins to verge on the elegiac, Sauter punctures it with colloquial directness – collapsing the sublime into the banal:

*ehk on kodu ka surm  
kusti imaginaarne laip  
millest mitu kuud  
veel üle astusin  
toas ja esikus  
koduste surnute kohalolu  
ja väiksed vaidlused nendega  
ehkki keppi nendega ei tee  
ja kommi neile ei too  
paraku (pp. 82–83)*

(maybe death is also home / kusti's imaginary corpse / that i walked over / for several months / in the living room and in the hallway // the presence of the dead at home / and small arguments with them / even though you don't fuck with them / and don't bring them candy / alas)

This interruption of the elegiac register becomes a defining strategy in Sauter's poetics of mourning. At moments he even moves toward denial, evoking a weight of grief that feels like "sadness without name or cause". The book ultimately closes in silence, offered as the final sign of mourning:

*ah need erinevad vaikused  
kui saaks neid lindistada  
vaikus pärast pojä surma  
vaikus pärast tüli lõppu  
tühi vaikus vaikse mere kaldal  
vaikus enne etenduse algust  
ja pärast aplausi  
/.../  
mul on suur vaikustekollektsioon  
ja vaikusi tuleb kogu aeg juurde  
vaikused on tiined  
minevikust ja tulevikust  
ja räägivad palju  
kuigi vaikselt (p. 174)*

(ah these different silences / if only they could be recorded / silence after the death of my son // silence after the end of the quarrel / empty silence on the shore of the pacific ocean / silence before the show starts / and after the applause /.../ i have a large collection of silences / and silences are coming all the time

/ silences are pregnant / with the past and the future / and speak a lot / albeit quietly)

Mourning in Sauter's work thus ends not in resolution but in an accumulation of silences, where loss is dispersed into a presence at once continuous and elusive. His poetics figure grief as both immediate and belated, simultaneously acknowledged and denied, elevated and trivialised, a condition not to be overcome but to be inhabited, an aporia without closure. In the next mode, however, death becomes unbearable and sinks into an abyss without exit.

## 5. Abyssal mourning poetics

The fourth orientation may be described as an abyssal mourning poetics, a mode in which grief no longer seeks preservation, renewal, or substitution. It resists narrative progression, remaining in a state of depressive suspension, and lingers at the depths of existential rupture, where meaning – and the mourner's own self – threaten to break down. Whereas in earlier Estonian poetry the imagery of the abyss could suggest an obstacle to be overcome, both physically and spiritually, contemporary work tends to treat it as a symbol of bottomlessness, a figure that resists closure and final resolution.<sup>4</sup>

This poetics finds an expression in the work of Tõnis Vilu (b. 1988), whose *Kõik linnud valgusele* (2022, *All the Birds to the Light*) revisits the memory of a childhood friend who died by suicide while confronting his own experience of suicidal depression. Driven by urgency, the poems seek both to hold on to the dead and to reckon with the fear of forgetting – or of surviving – so that their very form comes to mirror a movement of bottomless descent and unresolved presence.

Whereas the other elegiac poets discussed here use the line break either to produce semantic cohesion or to emphasise rupture, in Vilu's work the structuring principle is primarily formal and visual – namely, line length. His lines are consistently similar, averaging 16–23 syllables, with most lines falling between 18–20 syllables. The final line of each poem is often shorter (5–7 syllables) and graphically separated by being right-aligned. For example, in the second poem of the collection:

*pean lähenema mälestusele soome lahe poolt olen hõre  
merejää kõrkjate vahel seisin siinsamas rannas kümme*

<sup>4</sup> See Lotman 2025 for a detailed discussion of the imagery of the abyss and bottomlessness in Estonian poetry.

*aastat tagasi täielik inimvare ütlesin vaikselt usun merd  
 sa ütled seda minule tulevikule see on ju öhtupimedus  
 meri mis usub merd (p. 6)*

(i must approach the memory from the gulf of finland i am thin / sea ice among  
 the reeds i stood on this very shore ten / years ago a complete human wreck i  
 said quietly i believe in the sea / you say it to me to the future this is after all  
 evening darkness / the sea that believes in the sea)

Fragmentation is also characteristic of the other poets writing in free verse, but typically their line breaks are motivated by phrasing. In Vilu's work, by contrast, broken phrases accumulate within a single unpunctuated line, only occasionally interrupted by enjambment; the final phrase or image may spill across several lines. This produces ambivalence, inviting the reader to decide where meaning begins and ends. This effect is intensified by the density of symbolism. For instance, one can read: "i am thin / sea ice among the reeds", but also "i am thin sea ice / among the reeds", or even "among the reeds / i stood". Here the poem offers rhythm as an open field of interpretation, so that grief itself is figured not as a fixed essence but as a shifting, elusive presence.

The opening poem marks the subject's non-identity with itself ("ära kutsu mind mu / enda matusele" – "do not call me to my / own funeral"), and signals the dispersal of self, from whose absent body light nonetheless shines through (p. 5). The dominant motifs are those of sinking toward the bottom without ever reaching it, a movement that echoes the biblical abyss as a figure of bottomlessness and endless falling. Several passages make this explicit: "mere peegeldused nad hoiavad mind põhja puutumast" (p. 7, "the reflections of the sea they keep me from touching the bottom"); "mina ei näe põhja" (p. 12, "I do not see the bottom").

This downward movement is inseparably tied to the apostrophised "you", the dead friend. The subject descends emotionally to join him, even inhabiting his state in the moments before suicide: "juba maetakse sind nägema" (p. 8, "already you are being buried to see"). The descent, however, is endless: the mourner falls towards the lost other without ever reaching him, for there is no ground. This state generates its own reality, repeatedly described in images of disintegration and dispersal: "olen hõre / merejää kõrkjate vahel" ("I am thin / sea ice among the reeds"), "kuivan pragunen iseendasse" (p. 8, "I dry crack into myself"). In this abyssal crisis, "even happiness cannot make us happy" (p. 9).

Temporal perspective underscores the persistence of loss. A poem written a decade after the friend's death insists that "juba kümme aastat su varjudeta tulevik on kestnud nüüdseks" (p. 18; "already ten years your future without shadows has lasted now"), as the speaker struggles to set a beginning for his

own life. Clinical voices also intrude: a doctor advises him to think of anything but himself (p. 58), while recurring panic attacks in spring, sudden weeping, and the sensation of a scraped-away “bedrock of feelings” (p. 67) record the ongoing crisis. Such images of symptom and erosion intensify the impression of an interminable descent.

The lost childhood friend is never reconstructed as a full portrait but surfaces only in fragments, marked by recklessness and self-destruction – memories of speeding cars, dilated pupils, or the traces of violence at home. One poem recalls, for instance, the friend’s troubling admiration for his father’s fists and the atmosphere of domestic aggression that shaped his youth.

The cause of death is never stated outright; although Vilu has explained in interviews that it was suicide, the poems approach it obliquely, as in the bitter recognition that: “eestlase tuli joomine ja enesetapud sina võitsid / sinul olid suuremad probleemid” (p. 32, “an Estonian’s fate was drinking and suicides you won / you had greater problems”). A schoolroom memory frames the subject’s death through cultural discourse, when a teacher poses the stark opposition of cowardice and courage (p. 53). Most powerfully, the recurring motif of hanging fuses the “I” with the “you”, culminating in lines where the speaker imagines cutting his friend down from a tree while simultaneously cutting himself down in the same act: “olen kinni ühes puu küljest alla lõigatud tundes ühesainsas / lõikan sind puu küljest alla ühesainsas tundes lõikan end alla / ühesainsas tundes” (p. 20, “I am tied to one tree cut down in one feeling / I cut you down from the tree in one feeling I cut myself down / in one feeling”).

Taken together, these motifs form a poetics of abyssal mourning in which grief is neither preserved nor transformed but endured as endless falling, dispersal, and psychic dissolution. Vilu’s elegy resists the trajectory toward consolation or renewal, instead dwelling in radical negativity, where the self collapses into the lost other and the abyss becomes its own groundless reality.

## 6. Closing Reflections

Mourning poetry confronts a double impossibility. Poetry is already an attempt to voice what resists articulation, to shape language around absence; in the case of bereavement this difficulty intensifies, for it asks how to speak of one who no longer exists, how to lend the dead a place within the living word. The elegiac mode moves restlessly between farewell, reanimation, and dialogue with the absent, oscillating between the will to preserve, the compulsion to narrate, and the temptation to fall silent.

At the same time, poetry destabilises temporality. Its repetitions, breaks, and fragmentary forms resist linear progression, staging grief as both temporal

process and spatial constellation, a fabric woven of pauses and returns. Elegy does not dissolve such paradoxes but inhabits them: it moves between time and space, continuity and rupture, order and disorder, eternity and the instant.

The four modes outlined in this study can also be understood through the relational triad of self, other, and world that underlies much elegy theory. Memorial mourning centres the lost other; self-transformative mourning foregrounds the bereaved self; displaced mourning shifts grief outward into the world of objects, fragments, or metaphor; and abyssal mourning collapses the self inward into a state of psychic suspension. In this sense, displaced and abyssal mourning represent two possible inflections of what Ramazani terms the anti-elegiac: grief may be externalised into dispersed worldly images or internalised into radical negativity.

Seen together, these modes situate contemporary Estonian elegy within key trajectories of elegy scholarship while clarifying how mourning moves dynamically across the coordinates of self, other, and world.

Across these modes, the expression of grief is inseparable from the poetics of estrangement that frames this study. Estrangement arises as the mourner's relation to the self, the lost other, or the world becomes unfamiliar. Memorial mourning estranges the boundary between presence and absence; self-transformative mourning estranges the self from itself; displaced mourning refracts grief into altered perceptions of the surrounding world; and abyssal mourning pushes estrangement to its limit, where all coordinates threaten to collapse. In this way, contemporary Estonian elegy renders grief perceptible precisely through the disruptions of perception that reconfigure how the self encounters loss, language, and reality.

Taken together, contemporary Estonian elegiac writing sketches a plural landscape of mourning poetics. Some poems preserve the lost in image and memory, others map the self's slow transformation, disperse grief into fragments, or let it collapse into bottomlessness. What unites them is their refusal of definitive resolution. Instead, they fashion a poetics of mourning that inhabits paradox itself: a language where memory and dissolution, narration and silence, the self and the other remain inseparable, and where death is borne not by closure but by a sustained openness to its unending presence.

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