

Estonian Academy of Arts

Faculty of Fine Arts

Department of Animation

Helo Irik

Fear and Loathing in EKA

A Personal Journey to a Master's Degree in Animation

Master's thesis

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Tallinn

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Abstract

This thesis presents a recollection of my years at the Estonian Academy of Arts (henceforth EKA). It covers both personal milestones as well as professional development through the four years I spent in EKA. The main text is written as a sort of chronicle focusing mostly on producing animation films and the issues that arise with this task. The aim of this paper is to share my journey to become an animation filmmaker. I present a chronological outline of my studies alongside key events of my personal and emotional life, which greatly affected my work and productivity. In addition to that, I describe my work process and techniques used in my two films *Not Funny* and *Home Office*.

Why?

I write this paper as an example or guide of how one can study in the Department of Animation at EKA. The thesis is essentially a case study of my development at the school. Therefore it offers tremendous personal gain as it allows introspection and self-analysis, which helps me grow as a creator. In addition, I hope the thesis will encourage others like me, who come from a different field to enter animation studies and not give up even though things might not go as planned. Thus I hope this text presents a positive role model for potential students who enter the Department with little or no animation experience and have feelings of uncertainty or doubt.

Through writing this thesis I realised how much I was crippled with self-doubt and feelings of inadequacy. This constant feeling of being found out as a fraud is one of the components of so-called impostor syndrome¹. Essentially this is a feeling of not being competent or good

¹ R. Herrmann, Impostor Syndrome Is Definitely a Thing – The Chronicle of Higher Education 16 November 2016, <https://gradfund.rutgers.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/Impostor-Syndrome-Is-Definitely-a-Thing-The-Chronicle-of-Higher-Education.pdf> (accessed 14 July 2020)

enough despite apparent qualities.²³ Studies have shown that these feelings are especially common when starting a new career or project.⁴ Therefore it is quite reasonable to assume that first-year students in a new environment might experience these feelings as well. As I grew more comfortable in EKA, the feeling of not belonging also lessened to a degree.

Focusing this paper on myself and my work is not out of place. In various fields like biology, neurology, education, etc., there has been scientific research in the light of individual variability.⁵ So there are precedents that researching the individual can also have merit. Thus I place my thesis alongside these papers and hope that my individual account could inspire and comfort other students who might recognise themselves in some parts of my recollection. But I also hope that the professors of EKA will find it interesting to see the workflow from a student's perspective.

As my studies spanned four years instead of two this thesis also documents a time of change at EKA. My studies took place during the construction and completion of the new building. Hence I witnessed the moving of the Department repeatedly. During my time at EKA there were also considerable changes in the Department of Animation itself; starting with the scandal of removing Priit Pärn as the head of the Department⁶ to him later quietly leaving the Department altogether.

² J. Langford, P. R. Clance, The Impostor Phenomenon: Recent Research Findings Regarding Dynamics, Personality and Family Patterns and Their Implications for Treatment – Psychotherapy Volume 30 Fall 1993, <https://paulineroseclance.com/pdf/-Langford.pdf> (accessed 14 July 2020)

³ J. Kolligian, R. J. Sternberg, Perceived fraudulence in young adults: Is there an "impostor syndrome"? – Journal of Personality Assessment, 56(2) 1991, p 308–326, https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327752jpa5602_10 (accessed 14 July 2020)

⁴ J. A. Villwock, L. B. Sobin, L. A. Koester, and T. M. Harris, Impostor syndrome and burnout among American medical students: a pilot study – International Journal of Medical education 31 October 2016, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5116369/#r6> (accessed 14 July 2020)

⁵ L. T. Rose, P. Rouhani, and K. W. Fischer, The Science of the Individual – Mind, Brain, and Education September 2013, <https://lsi.gse.harvard.edu/files/gse-individuality/files/roserouhanifischer2013.pdf> (accessed 14 July 2020)

⁶ T. Priimägi, Pärna langetamise lugu [The Story of the Felling of Priit Pärn] – Sirp 10 June 2016 <https://www.sirp.ee/s1-artiklid/film/parna-langetamise-lugu/> (accessed 14 July 2020)

How?

The title of this thesis is a wordplay on the Hunter S. Thompson novel *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas: A Savage Journey to the Heart of the American Dream*⁷. The main body of text I have arranged and written in a somewhat literary style. I present a sort of mock-diary or chronicle of my years at EKA. I call it mock-diary because I am Estonian and I do not usually write personal notes in English. Yet I attest that the contents are true and written as honestly as possible. To achieve this the language I use is not formal. As such this is a very personal recollection of events.

I have split the text into academic years and in-between there are literary references from authors who have influenced me. These extracts or poems also carry an underlying idea or emotion that I associate with the time I describe. The quotes are presented in their original languages and the translations can be found in Appendix I. I tend to refer to people using their given names so in addition to references the footnotes also contain full names of people I mention. I have also included graphic material pertaining to the work process as well as some illustrations of my emotional state or ideas at the time. All of the illustrations have been produced by myself during my studies at EKA from 2016 to 2020.

⁷ H. S. Thompson, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas: A Savage Journey to the Heart of the American Dream* (1971), London: Harper Perennial, 2005 reprint

kahekümne viiesena mõtlesin,
et küll ma olin ikka kahekümnesena loll
kolmekümnesena mõtlesin,
et küll ma olin ikka kahekümne üheksasena loll
nüüd kolmekümne kolmesena mõtlen,
et küll ma olin ikka eile loll
homme olen kohe loll
ülehomme olen juba homme loll

Jaan Pehk⁸

2016

I am so angry and frustrated. The faint feeling of happiness was sucked out of my being the moment I entered the room. I am staring at the computer screen trying to make sense of everything in front of me and I realise. She is never going to change. All of her promises are empty and I am living in a parallel universe where lying, stealing and belittling your employees is normal. Then I feel it. There is a tear running down my cheek. I touch the salty water and realise this is the second time I have cried in the office. Without fault, I come to a decision. This is it. Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice, shame on me. As I sign the resignation letter I am suddenly overcome by joy. It is such a strange feeling. It seems I haven't felt this in forever. Unfortunately, the process of leaving my job is dragged out to a month of overtime and agony. But I am free. I am finally free. Free of this oppression. And suddenly I feel very empty.

The initial elation of ridding myself of all the negativity and stress of my very insignificant job suddenly dissipates. I have left my little alternate world of mental abuse and terror to rejoin the land of the living. Sadly it is not that easy. I feel a tremendous emptiness inside me. I also feel disconnected from the world. I spend hours staring at nothing, staring at the wall, staring at the void. It is hard to care about anything. I don't even need cheering up because I am not sad. I am just numb. The hollowness inside me keeps me from feeling or thinking. I feel like a blow-up doll drifting on a vast ocean.

⁸J. Pehk, 100% Jaan Pehk, Pärnu-Saarde, 2011, p 38



Ill. 1. Self-portrait as a floating blow-up doll. Loosely inspired by Roxy Music⁹.

Days are all the same. I eat, I sleep, I repeat. Time is nonexistent. I have a faint understanding that spring is turning into summer, but it makes no difference to me. Then something happens. My mother asks if I would like to go back to school. A seed is planted in my internal void. As I flip through the pages of local universities it slowly turns into a seedling. Animation. That is the key. I remember the old yearning. They weren't accepting students the year I graduated from high school. But now the time is right. I have a goal and a purpose. I will go back to school.

⁹ B. Ferry, *In Every Dream Home a Heartache*, Roxy Music album *For Your Pleasure* – Island Records, 1973

Mi lucha es dura y vuelvo
con los ojos cansados
a veces de haber visto
la tierra que no cambia,
pero al entrar tu risa
sube al cielo buscándome
y abre para mí todas
las puertas de la vida.

Pablo Neruda¹⁰

Year One

I seem to be late to the party. Everyone is already acquainted with each other and making inside jokes.¹¹ Somehow socks are important. I am still dumbfounded at how I managed to get in. I figure they just accepted everyone who showed any interest. Everyone else seems to be super professional though. At least they all have relevant experience. I painted once. During the summer I frantically painted on the coffee table to make sure I had some sort of audiovisual material to present to the entrance committee. How in the world was I accepted?



III. 2. Notebook sketch from a philosophy lecture on René Descartes.

¹⁰ P. Neruda, Tu risa [Your smile], Captain's Verses [Los versos del Capitán, 1952], Transl. D. D. Walsh, New Directions Publishing Corporation, 2004, pp 16–17

¹¹ Many foreign students had together petitioned the school to keep Priit Pärn as Head of the Department.

Classes start and I am petrified. They will find out that I am no good. They will see, that I am hollow inside and void of ideas. I haven't actually drawn or painted in ages. It is physically exhausting. Priit¹² is worried about me. He tells me not to get caught up in details or a single image and focus more on the overall outcome. He says that in the past he has seen painters who find making storyboards hard because they want to make a pretty and detailed drawing for each frame.

They don't know me yet. I am lazy. I hate drawing. I love painting because you can always take a bigger brush. Painting is fast and forgiving. Drawing is slow and tedious. I make my best effort to draw a storyboard. I make a preliminary sketch and then redraw the entire storyboard and write an explanation under every image. This will change.

I try to make a story that I can paint. I learn this is a mistake. I should have just come up with a more interesting idea. Everyone else is so good. I feel like a con artist just before being found out. I don't deserve being here. But there is also nowhere else to go. I will focus on the idea next time. Priit gives the best instruction for our tasks. 'Try not to be boring.'

We try so hard. Yet we are still stuck in the forest of clichés. Priit's classes are fun though. I feel I am slowly coming back to life. There seems to be a kind of competition between all of us. Everyone tries to make the funniest, cleverest, most inventive story of the bunch. We try to make each other laugh. More than anything we try to make Priit laugh. Sometimes we succeed, oftentimes we fail. The forest of clichés is thick and vast. It is easy to stay there.

I try to draw inspiration from films and books. But it is a double-edged sword as I feel so many films are almost identical. The Hollywood formula becomes boring after a while and I've seen too many interchangeable films. Actually, this happens all over the world. My 10+ years as a PÖFF¹³ volunteer have taught me what to expect from films produced in

¹² Here and later Priit Pärn

¹³ Tallinn Black Nights Film Festival

Kazakhstan or Indonesia for example. It might also be, that I've just become familiar with the taste of the selection committee.

Books are somewhat more interesting. There seems to be more liberty in the format and more creative input from the consumer. I read the author's 'guidelines' and create the characters and worlds. This works best with contemporary literature. Very descriptive prose is too controlling for me. I love short fiction. There is a lot of liberty there. You can aim for a funny or interesting story or present a feeling. But therein lies the challenge of how to depict a character's inner world on screen. I try to emulate a certain emotion or a state of mind in a picture. This is not easy.

I find that my most successful storyboards are those based on real life; exaggerated of course. I try to look at the world with open eyes and an open mind. I observe people and situations around me and search for the absurd or amusing. I then add on to it. I make little jokes. It saddens me that whenever I try to move to the realm of science fiction, I fail miserably. My favourite genre seems out of reach.

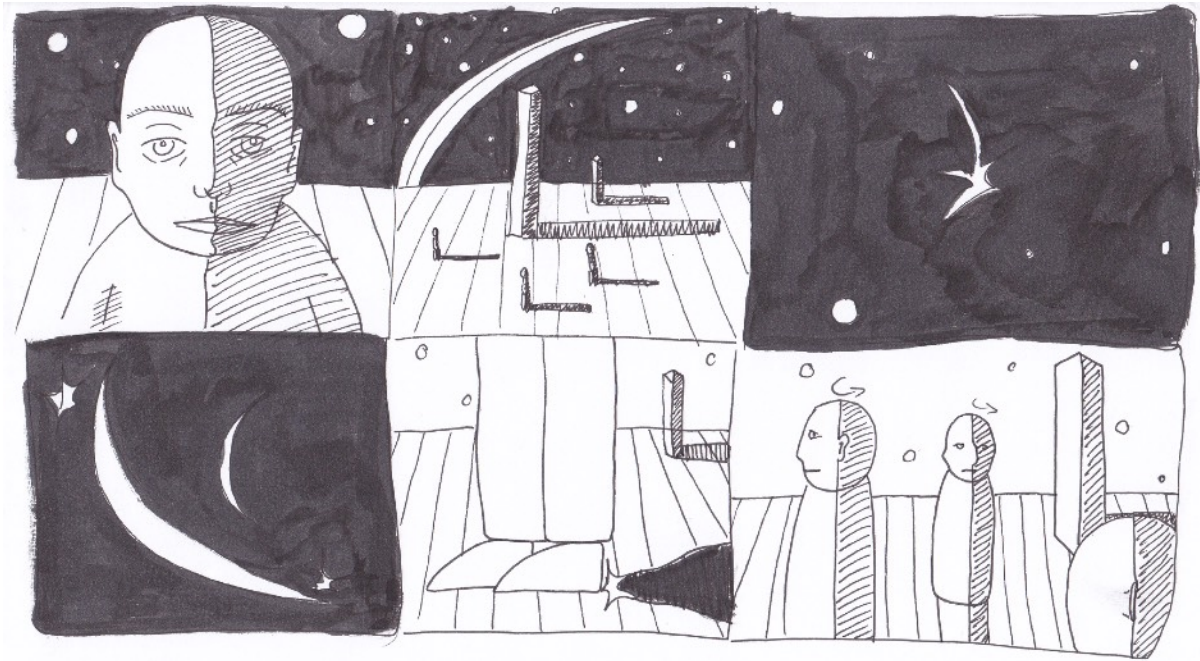


III. 3. Looking for inspiration.

Some days I have no ideas for Priit's class. It would be so easy to just skip it and not go. If I don't have a storyboard I can just not show up. This is wrong. This kind of thinking leads to failure. I have to present at least half of an idea or I won't grow. I did not come here to be afraid and hide away. I head out with a half-finished task. I keep drawing on the bus ride to school. I keep drawing until the very last minute, but I don't let myself defeat me. This is the right course of action. The storyboards now have only very basic sketches with no explanatory text.

I take animation classes with Bachelor students. I make balls bounce and flags flap in the wind. For some reason, I cannot get the flag to move properly. I also pester my course mates and ask them to introduce various animation programs to me. Everyone is very friendly and nice. I am playing catch-up with professionals.

The first semester flies by and suddenly we have to come up with an original idea for our first film. I am at a loss. I have been enjoying the process of coming up with ideas, but there don't seem to be any worth animating. I feel all the creativity draining out from me. It is like sand between my fingers. I try to catch at least one grain. I go to class with a vague concept of making a film about shadows. While pitching my idea, it falls to pieces. I have nothing. I go back to a previous storyboard, that got a few laughs. It only contains one gag and it falls apart as I try to develop a story.



Ill. 4. Fragment of a storyboard about a shadow world.

Everything is suddenly much harder. My father dies a few days after his 56th birthday. It is sudden. Nobody expected it. He seemed healthy and fit. Apparently his heart was too big. School seems arbitrary, but at the same time, it is an escape. Home is suffocating. Mother is torn to pieces and her grief is overwhelming. It is all-encompassing and devours anyone in its path. I keep myself busy. I take care of my new puppy, who demands attention and love and acts out all the emotions that I am trying to keep inside. I run errands. I do school tasks. I feel like the world is imploding on me.

Consultations with Priit and Olga¹⁴ start and I go in with some last-minute caricatures. It is obvious that I am lost. I do not have a coherent story. All of a sudden Olga says: 'But you have an idea, the one in the cinema.' It was a class task. I hadn't even thought about it. It had some issues and I also felt that using a class task to this degree would somehow be cheating.

We were to depict a screening hall with characters A and B. There was supposed to be growing tension in the film and we were required to also show what was happening on the screen. For the screen, I had recycled some older film noir style storyboard which nobody

¹⁴ Priit and Olga Pärn



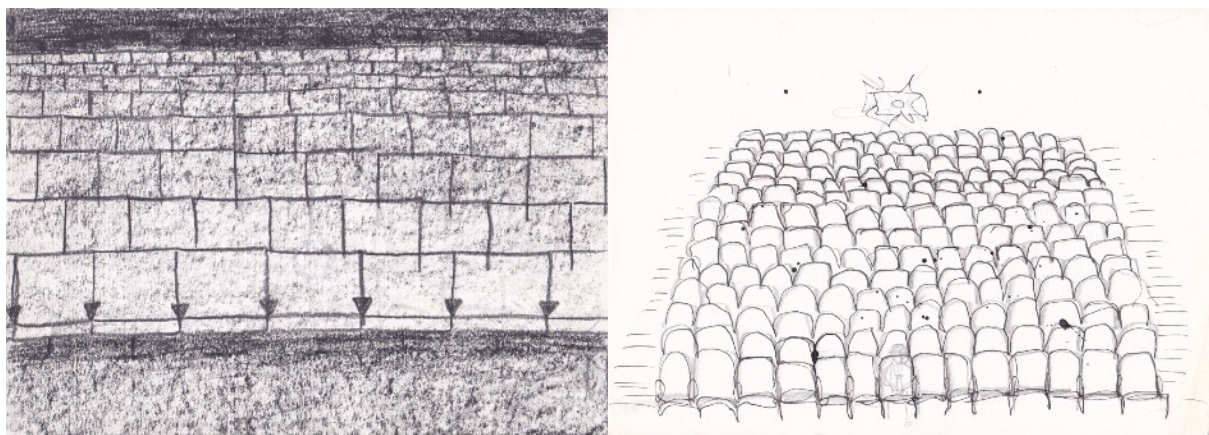
III. 6. Stick figure character design for the train heist.

sometimes when everything seems at
its worst
when all conspires
and gnaws
and the hours, days, weeks
years
seem wasted –
stretched there upon my bed
in the dark
looking upward at the ceiling
i get what many will consider an
obnoxious thought:
it's still nice to be
Bukowski.

Charles Bukowski¹⁶

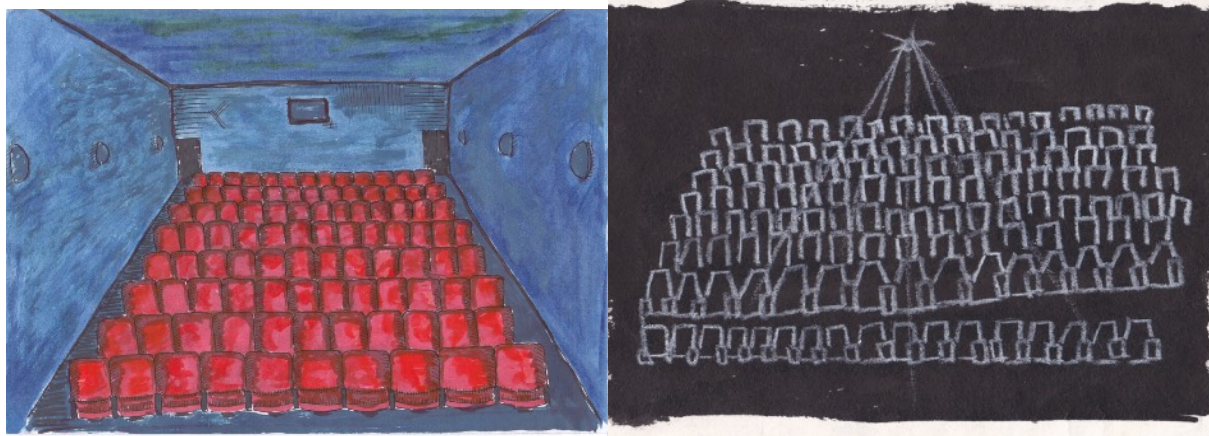
Year Two

We are at Lembitu Street. The building is cold and old and somewhat uncomfortable. The toilets stink. Olga thinks I might want to animate the cinema hall portion of my film using the paint on glass method. I am not against it. Paint is my friend. As are brushes, turpentine and palette knives. It takes almost one semester to build the appropriate rig.



Ill. 7-8. Tests for the screening hall

¹⁶ C. Bukowski, *You Get So Alone at Times That it Just Makes Sense*. Black Sparrow Press, 1986, <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/979919-sometimes-when-everything-seems-at-its-worst-when-all-conspires> (accessed 14 July 2020)



Ill. 9-10. Tests for the screening hall

Meanwhile, I work on the story and animate violent stick figures in Adobe Animate. It is fun. More fun than I would have thought. The design is so basic that a well-trained monkey could draw them. I am very pleased. I draw seven frames and the stick figure wobbles. I draw more and it moves. Magic. I do this at home. I buy the program and tablet and animate at my desk. I try to do it at school, but I don't like it there.

I can't imagine I would ever be able to animate if I didn't have the digital tools. I sing praise to onionskin and playback options. I can see immediately when something is off. Regardless, it is tiring. A few hours in and I am exhausted. I dismiss the idea of redrawing my stick figures on paper later. My family is still surprised that I chose animation as a possible career path. I am incredibly impatient by nature and nothing comes quickly in animation. Except for maybe failure. You can work on something for years and it might suck. I expect failure constantly.



Ill. 11-13. Stick figures drawn with different markers

By now it is certain that I will not graduate in two years. Besides personal issues with grief, time management and general exhaustion (I seem to be tired all the time), I just took too long to come up with the concept, design and structure of my film.

I stumble on the final look of the screening hall almost accidentally. When the paint on glass rig is finally complete I set out to play with oil paint. I try a few different things. My hand is rigid and I am attempting to loosen my grip as well as my mind. As I start scraping off the paint from the surface of the glass I am taken by the image that it creates. I play for a while. It is pretty. There is only one colour so it is also quick, plus sustainable because I can reuse the paint over and over again. I have fun. The Pärns approve and now I have the look of my film.



Ill. 14. The screening hall seats in the chosen technique.

Animating with oil paint is also exhausting. It seemed quick at first, but precision work is very difficult. I make it a goal to see the Pärns as often as possible and to go animate at school at least once a week. It is necessary for me to maintain steady progress. Some days are complete failures. For me, painting is not something that can be forced necessarily. It either happens or it doesn't. Some days I am liberated and make good progress. Other days I am in a slump and nothing works.

Every session starts with me turning on the computer, camera, and setting up or checking the lights. Then I cover the glass surface with my trusty Winsor&Newton Winton Oil Colour 32. It takes me about two months to realise that the tone is not actually black but Paynes Gray. I use a palette knife. I keep reusing my paint that I keep in a small airtight plastic container. Because it is being worked and reworked on the glass it contains little dry specs of paint. These give the surface a kind of grain. I like it. I pick out bigger pieces if they start hindering the outcome.

The original 200 ml tube of paint is quite old. It was probably purchased back in the 1990s by my father. He was a strong believer that there is no black in nature. The paint is quite thick. I mix in some linseed oil to get a better consistency. It is trial and error. If the solution is too thin, it starts running on the glass. The glass is, of course, laid horizontally but the paint starts forming little drops and making fine lines is impossible. I become well acquainted with my little paint mixture.

I take a couple of test shots with the camera. Nothing is worse than having already started animating and then discovering that everything was shot out of focus. I learn from my mistakes. Urmas Jõemees gave us a lecture on Dragonframe and I am armed with the knowledge of what camera settings to use. I am going for the black and white look.



Ill. 15. Character design of A and B

I start scraping. I scrape the paint off to make figures, lines or anything that is on the screen really. I draw by taking out paint rather than applying it. My brain gets confused sometimes and I do the opposite. I want to make a line on the black surface and instead of scraping the paint off so that the white light can form a line by shining through I slap more paint on. I feel like an idiot and correct this immediately.

The building is against me. I am cold and sweating at the same time. I hate it. My studio is in a kind of corridor with no ventilation. I have to remember to air it once in a while when my mind gets foggy. To the right of me, there is a permanently sealed door. There is life on the other side. I think it is the New Media Department. I hear sounds and music and bits of conversation. It helps me stay connected to the world somehow. I like animating alone in the building. Yet sometimes the walls seem to be closing in on me while I am there. Behind me, there is a sort of cupboard/closet space. It is the tiniest room to build a studio in. Mari and Liis¹⁷ work there. They are my lovely neighbours. Sometimes we meet, but often we work on

¹⁷ Mari Kivi and Liis Kokk

a different schedule. It is motivating to have people working towards a similar goal in close proximity.

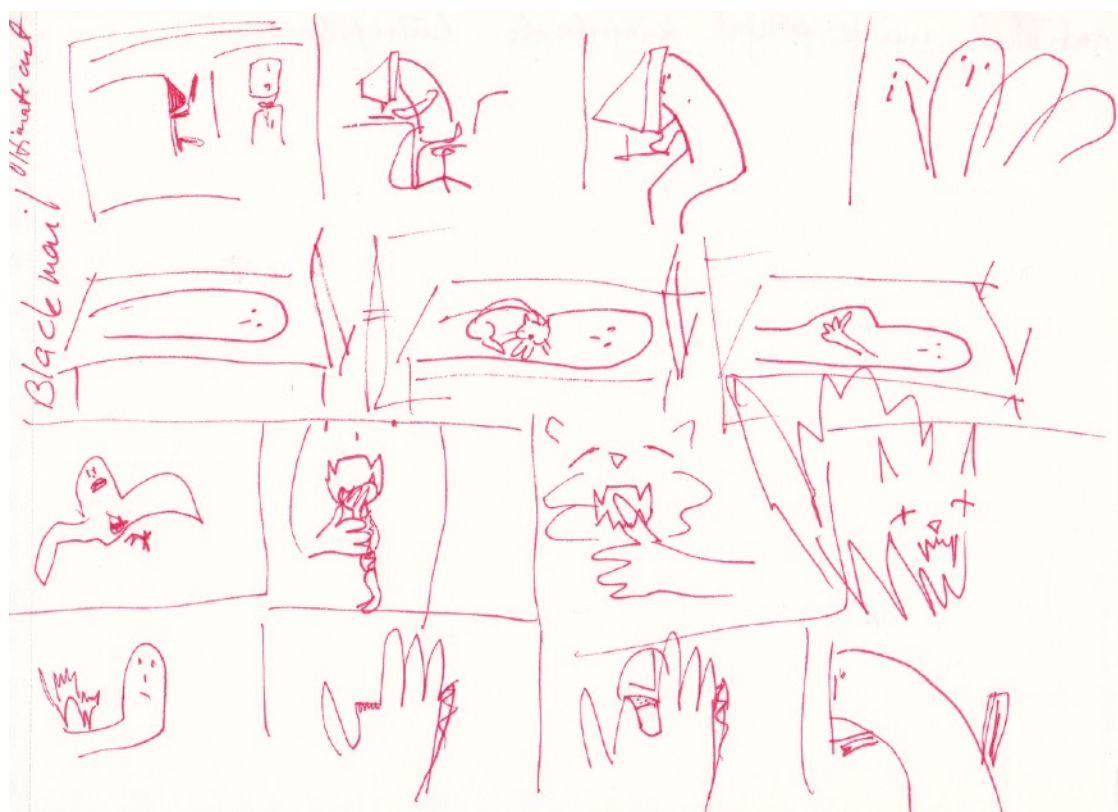
I am turning thirty. My friends are getting married and having children. I feel left behind. I also know that I am not nearly ready for any of that. I struggle with the societal expectations of femininity.¹⁸¹⁹²⁰ I struggle with my mother demanding grandchildren. I feel remorseful that my father did not see his potential grandchildren. I think I do want children at one point. I should probably be mentally stable for that to happen though. I don't feel stable.

These feelings and the fact that my cat keeps licking my eyeballs in the morning inspire an idea for another film. My very own idea. I think there is more risk with an original idea. I feel insecure explaining it to the Pärns. A long time has passed since the first semester and I feel the creative juices that were set loose at that time have dried up a little. Also, everyone from my course is working independently now and there is little exchange of ideas and creative synergy between us. I miss it. I miss people. I also miss money.

¹⁸ L. Mallene, Martin Helme: Istanbuli konventsiooni ainus efekt on see, et lasteaias õpetatakse poisse kleiti kandma [Martin Helme: The Only Effect of the Istanbul Convention Is That Boys are Taught to Wear Dresses Kindergarten] – Eesti Päevaleht 17 May 2016, <https://epl.delfi.ee/eesti/martin-helme-istanbuli-konventsiooni-ainus-efekt-on-see-et-lasteaias-opetatakse-poisse-kleiti-kandma?id=74553915> (accessed 14 July 2020)

¹⁹ P. Dieves, Lastetud naised, laske oma ülikõrge lattu alla! [Women Without Children, Lower Your Extremely High Standards!] – Õhtuleht 8 June 2016, <https://www.ohhtuleht.ee/738546/priit-dieves-lastetud-naised-laske-oma-ulikorge-lattu-alla> (accessed 14 July 2020)

²⁰ Martin Helme: 27aastane lastetu naine on ühiskondlikult kahjulik element [Martin Helme: A 27-year-old Woman Without Children Is a Destructive Element of Society] – naistekas.delfi.ee 18 May 2016, https://naistekas.delfi.ee/persoon/elu_lugu/martin-helme-27aastane-lastetu-naine-on-uhiskondlikult-kahjulik-element?id=74561045 (accessed 14.07.2020)



Ill. 16. Initial storyboard of a vague idea for a film about a woman and a cat

The time to concentrate solely on school is over. I have obligations and I need sustenance. This means I need to balance work life with school. I translate. I animate. I get caught up in translations and stop animating. This is frustrating. I should prioritise school, but I am somehow unable. It takes many months to find a precarious balance. Nata and June²¹ graduate.

²¹ Nataliya Metlukh and Jung Hyun Kim

ükskord
ma kirjutan luuletuse
millesse lugeja mõte
kiunudes kinni jookseb
nagu mootorsaag
vettinud kasetümikasse
ja enam välja ei saa
o-ye!

ükskord
ma kirjutan luuletuse
mis vaikselt
lebab paberil
nii et laud selle all ragiseb
ja siis
rusudeks prantsatab
o-ye!

ükskord
ma kirjutan luuletuse
mille juba esimesi värsegi lugedes
iga särasilmne neidis
end kohe mu käte vahele surub
ja minu omaks saada ihaleb
o-ye!

Wimberg²²

Year Three

The department moved again. We are in the new EKA building and I would like to say everything is new and shiny, but in reality, it is dusty and filled with construction workers and noise and boxes and people and confusion. We don't have a kitchen in the department, but the toilets don't smell. There are also new goodies like digital blackboards etc.. I like it.

Most of the animation for my first film is done now, but it needs work. So I delve into the world of After Effects. Such a world of opportunities and once again tiring work. I am not a

²² Wimberg, Ükskord ma kirjutan luuletuse (o-ye) [Once I will write a poem (o-ye)], Wabastatud Wärsid [Liberated Verses], Pegasus, 2010, p 59

fan of detailed tasks. I get grey hair with masking my paint on glass material and compositing scenes. Progress is slow. I lose motivation and take more paid work.

At the same time, I try to convince Priit that it is a good idea to make a film about a woman giving birth to a cat and then being eaten by the same cat and that cat then giving birth to a human baby. The imagery is inspired by working behind a computer day in and day out, but also by Francisco Goya's *Saturn Devouring His Son*. Priit doesn't buy the story.

I play with the real world and dream world concepts. I come up with different dream scenarios. The birthing scene stays. The eating concept remains. I go back and forth between different dream scenarios involving transformation. The Pärns want me to explore different endings. I am reluctant, but try to remember that I went to school to learn. And they know what they talk about. It is a bitter pill to swallow that your brightest idea is actually not that good.

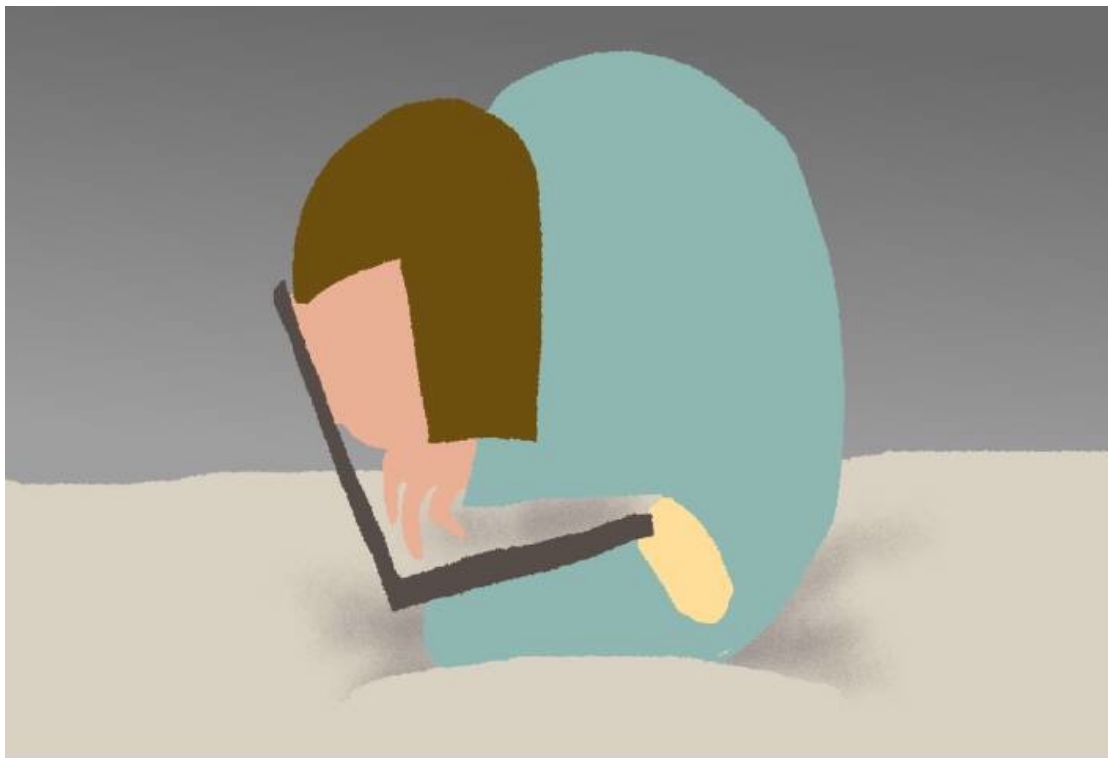


III. 17. Discarded storyboard. The train makes a reappearance.

I feel like I am walking in one place. It is frustrating to feel like you are working but not making any progress. It is demotivating. Time flies by. I start character design for my cat lady project even though the idea is still half baked. I try different mediums. I ruin a lot of perfectly good paper. I think animating on paper looks beautiful, but is very wasteful. I worry about the Earth. I worry about time. I go digital. I play with different lines.

I take part in an introductory class to TV Paint and try out different styles. The program is nice for colouring hand-drawn material, so I play with that idea once again. Maybe I'll draw everything by hand, scan it and paint it in TV Paint. Or maybe I will animate completely digitally without using any visible lines at all. Should I prioritise speed? The fastest way to animate seems to be digital cut-out. Somehow I am unable to fall in love with how it looks.

I try to find a style that would come naturally to me. I look at my childhood drawings and think of the joy and liberty in creating them. I try to emulate that. I fail. I start doodling and making a mess with the lines. I like it. As I draw more the initial look changes somewhat. Becomes more graphic. The Pärns tell me to run with it and continue. I think they are also worried about my lack of progress.



Ill. 18. Possible design for the second film.



Ill. 19. Messy style that is used in the film.

The other film is finally shaping up. I am in the editing process. I am so keen on trying to make it look decent. I make a preliminary file so I can edit together with Olga and Priit. I am looking forward to picking their brains and making use of their extensive knowledge. I have been struggling with timing. When I first started animating I felt the need to make progress and that meant that everything came out at a heightened pace. But viewers need time to understand what is happening. And a film needs viewers. So throughout the animating process, I learned not to rush. To pause.

To my great surprise, there is no extensive re-editing taking place. The Pärns are quite happy with what I've done. We tweak it here and there, but that is pretty much it. This is very cool. I feel like a boss. We start searching for music and turn to the classics. Through our Youtube shuffle, we stumble across Shostakovich's *Waltz No. 2*. It works like magic. Yet for some reason, none of us commit to it straight away. I go home with the task of deciding on the music. I listen to Beethoven's *Moonlight Sonata Movement Three*. It is a beautiful piece and also works with the material, but the tonality of it is different from the waltz.

I listen to Shostakovich's *Waltz No. 2* again. It fits like a glove. Suddenly all of my wonky animation seems to be waltzing in tune with the music. The search is over, there are no other

options. This piece is especially fitting because it becomes the soundtrack of the entire film. Initially, the plan was to find music to accompany the on-screen action of the violent stick figures. Suddenly I do not need to differentiate between the two environments. Serendipitously we found a unifying factor. I go the ERR²³ archives to search for the perfect performance and set Mari out to acquire the rights for it. It doesn't go as planned.

The world of music rights seems strange to me. On the one hand, it is the livelihood of composers and musicians and therefore regulated and protected. On the other hand, it seems to abide by the Wild West rules. Whatever the reason might be I keep hitting a wall with acquiring the music rights. Nobody even answers. Maybe they consider this such a low key/ low budget project that they don't even bother. I don't know. I cannot force people to take money if I have no physical way of tracking them down. I opt for the Wild West rules and decide to deal with the music rights when somebody finally recognises that my film exists and they should be compensated for their contribution. I don't deal well with this kind of entropy. I feel a gnawing uneasiness at the back of my head. Sometimes it moves to my stomach.



Ill. 20. Anxiety personified.

²³ Estonian Public Broadcasting

I cast these worries aside and focus on the sound effects. I consider myself an adequate animator but definitely an incompetent sound designer so I leave it up to Björn²⁴. And it is a strange collaboration, though fruitful in the end. He takes his sweet time. When I receive the first draft I am unimpressed and excited at the same time. It is elating to see a film take on new dimensions and rise to another level. Yet it is strange to have it move in a slightly different direction than in your head.

²⁴ Björn Norralt

‘we demand rigidly defined areas of doubt and uncertainty!’

Douglas Adams²⁵

Year Four

I might have strange ideas when it comes to sound design. As much as I don’t like clean pictures I don’t like clean sounds. If my visual world is bare, I want it filled with audible noise. So my feedback is always: ‘I want more noise. Like the hum of a refrigerator. Make it like that.’ And Björn adds this refrigerator noise I think. It is impossible to tell actually. The speakers at school might as well be two tin cans connected with a string. The sound is abysmal. I have no idea if there actually are proper speakers in the department. We are unable to find them.

So we meet up at BFM and make final attack plans. The film is so close to completion that I can almost taste it. It tastes sweet. I am both excited and annoyed, that this simple and naive thing took so long. I push on with the other one.

I have found the most tedious and life draining way of colouring the dream sequences. It takes away my will to live. I basically draw over the initial sketch with six different colours. I knew I wanted my second film to have more colour than the first one. I played with different styles, but in the end, I was inspired by Norman McLaren’s *Pas de deux*. I thought I would make the colours follow the movements. The visuals ended up looking very busy, so extra movement would have probably made the story incomprehensible. Instead, I opt for very bright psychedelic colours. Superimposed on each other.

²⁵ D. Adams, *The Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy* (1979), New York: Del Rey Ballantine Books, 2005 reprint, p 154

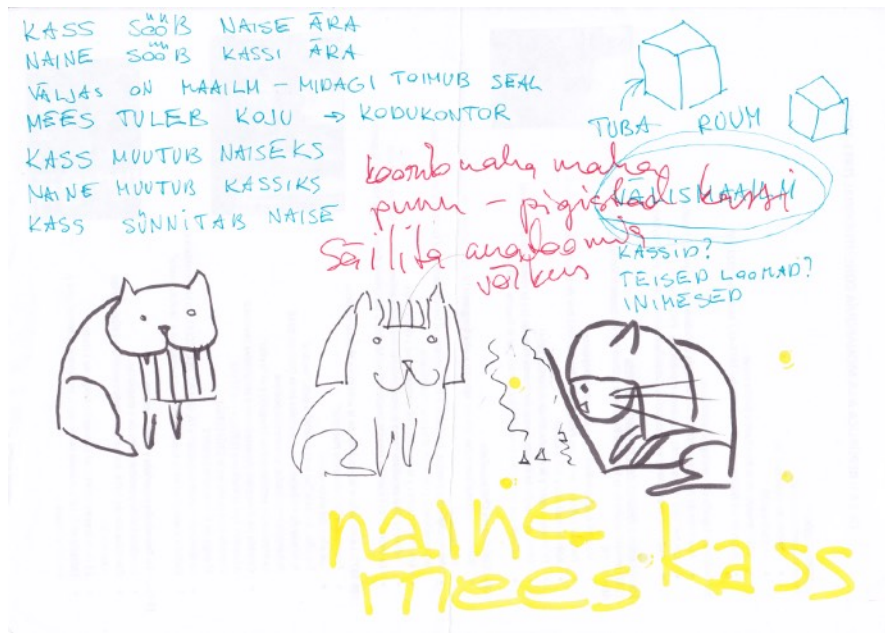


Ill. 21. A still from the coloured dream sequence

The colour choice reminds me of the game of *Twister*. Sometimes I find a flow and colouring turns into a sort of meditation and I am an ascended being drawing holy lines. Then I get hungry and it is just the most awful thing in the world. I myself drained all joy out of this process. Why was I so stupid? It takes forever. I am not even sure if it is worth it in the end.

I am off-kilter once again. I have too much work to concentrate on school. It is hard to find a balance. I go entire weeks without drawing a single line. It shows in the quality. The scenes differ from one and other. I say it is intentional. It almost is. This is my school project. It is evidence of what I have learned and how much I've grown and as such, it should reflect my journey. I keep telling myself that in order to move forward I cannot go back and start tinkering on scenes I considered done previously. I'll only do it if I have time. I never have time.

I also don't have an ending. I keep animating towards the abyss of no ending. The story has been running circles around itself. Changing and changing back. Two steps forward, three back, five sideways and I am still nowhere. I need to stop thinking about it and just draw it out. And that is what I do.



Ill. 22. Notes from a consultation with Priit and Olga. List of possible endings.

Things have turned interesting. Everyone has all the time in the world and I have none. I told all my clients that I am taking time off from working. This time is meant for animating. I feel I have been dragging out my studies for too long. It is time and it is possible, but now everything is weird. It is the Covid-19 lockdown and school is closed, offices are closed, people are to stay at home. You would think this works well for me. I work at home anyway and I'd have fewer distractions. Somehow this is not the case.

My mind is once again working against me. I think too much. Thinking is poison, it leads to inactivity and apathy. I need to draw, but I miss social contact. I feel I have little or no ways of recharging my batteries. I take longer and longer walks with my dog. Some days all I seem to do is walk. It helps. A little.

People around me are made redundant or forced to take substantial pay-cuts. I panic and take on a lot of work. I feel like an idiot. The whole idea was to graduate this year. Now I am self-sabotaging. There has got to be a solution for this. I reach out to the school and fellow students. We make a collective plea to postpone the defence. The Hail Mary works. I get more time.

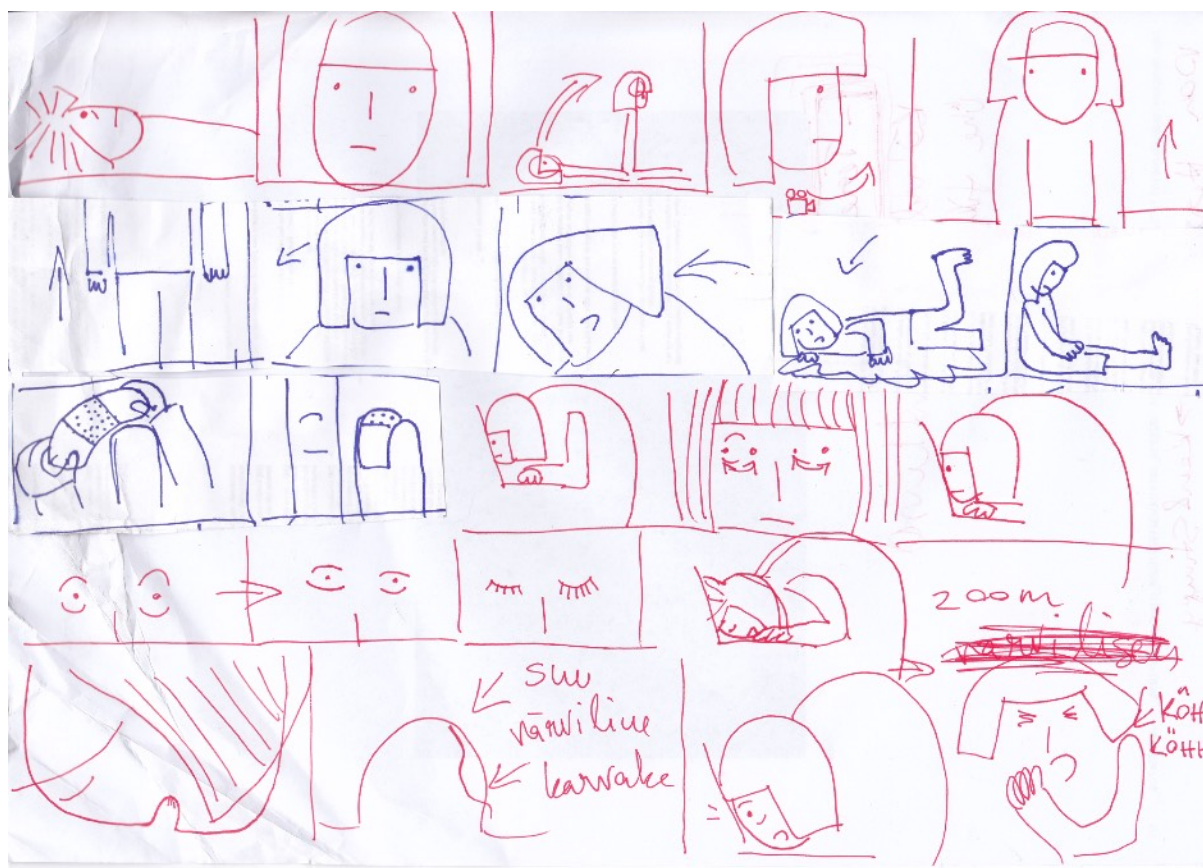
I should have learned by now that there is no such thing as more time. I present my final storyboard to the Pärns and we talk. I stare at the screen, I hear their family and I get an OK for the proposed ending. Spoiler: the woman gets eaten. I can't help but feel they just resigned from trying to push me in a better direction. At the moment I am not sure I care. I animate.

The lockdown ends and nothing changes. Almost. I visit my grandfather. He is very weak. I hope he will live to see me graduate. Not that graduating in itself is that important, but I want to show him my films. I should have shown him the first one already. I didn't though. I forgot the cable to connect my computer to the TV and the computer screen is too small and the speakers too weak. I enjoy the weekend in the countryside. I don't work on anything. Bliss.

Again I am working frantically. Time is almost out and I have a lot to do. Everything happens at once. Olga asks if I will graduate in January. Survival mode kicks in. This has to happen now! I try to animate faster. It works for a while, but it is also very draining. Scenes that require more effort and have taken several tries to get somewhat right are left as is. Done is better than perfect.

I start editing. This is something I am unable to rush. For this, I need to think. The sequence needs to settle and stand for a while so I can pick out the mistakes and places that don't work. Three days later I send it to the Pärns, convinced that it needs a lot of work. To my surprise, they don't think so.

In a sense, it is flattering, that I am more or less able to independently put together a palatable film. Regardless I feel I am missing out on a learning experience. Maybe this wouldn't have happened had we met face to face. Then I could also read their expressions. Then again I am running out of time. How much could I change at this point?



III. 23. Fragment of the final storyboard.

I fear I have made two identical films. The subject matter is similar as well as the structure. There are essentially the same amount of characters and the outcome is the same. Only the second one is not actually funny. In my relative haste, I might have subconsciously reverted to something that I knew from previous experience. Do I lack the courage to try something new? Once again, I think too much. I do have a feeling the film is too long. Anything over five minutes needs to be really good to keep people interested. Priit tells me that sound will make it seem less long and stretched out. Horret²⁶ agrees to take on the project.

There is still much to do with the second film. Olga proposes I hire a helper. I ask from the school. They are very reluctant to fund this. I feel unappreciated and undervalued. I also feel defiance. The world seems to be against me. I am living in a Hollywood tragedy. It is almost comical. My mother is in the hospital for hip replacement surgery. My cat has lost one eye to cancer and needs six different types of medicine daily. Something has appeared on her other

²⁶ Horret Kuus

eye. My dog has undergone surgery and the wound is not healing, which makes the vet suspect the worst. I have to play chauffeur to my family, but there is something wrong with the car. The list goes on. On top of that my communication with the school is strained. When I ask questions I am ignored or given standard answers. This annoys me. I feel drained. I have no energy. I translate. I animate. I hope for the best. Turns out Horret has unexpected duties that delay him from working on my film.

It is interesting how my attitude towards my films changes over time. At first, I feel excitement, that I have thought of something that might work. Then I explore the world I created and it is a feeling of discovery. Once I commit to the story and style, life becomes laborious and somewhat tedious. Annoyance grows into resentment and finally becomes loathing sprinkled with doubt. I've noticed that when I pause the animation process, take a vacation and later come back to it I feel a lot more love towards my project. I remember the initial idea and reasoning behind the film and it makes me more calm and confident. Then I animate for a while and the frustration resurfaces.

I honestly loathe my second film at the moment. I know this feeling will pass and be replaced by peaceful contentment. But now I am feeling everything but that. I contemplate not presenting my second film to the committee altogether. If it is not finished to my liking, I cannot present it to be judged. I jokingly say to my friends that I regret a lot of my life decisions. I am looking forward to September. I think that is when I can finally take a deep breath and declare all of this done. I will prevail until that time. I will succeed by that time. I will then live again. Life starts in the fall.

But I, being poor, have only my dreams;
I have spread my dreams under your feet;
Tread softly because you tread on my dreams.

William Butler Yeats²⁷

2020

As I present my body of work to the committee I am both terrified and proud. It is scary to present something so personal for others to judge. Then again I did work and learn while creating films. I am confident that I have made something to be proud of. Regardless of my insecurities and the holes that I dug myself into and out of, I am certain that I will make more films. All good things come to an end and so must my time at EKA as well.



Ill. 24. Coffee break with my dog Tilda at Lembitu Street. Photo by Olga Pärn.

²⁷ W. B. Yeats, He Wishes For the Cloths of Heaven, The Wind Among the Reeds, 1899, <https://interestingliterature.com/2015/11/a-short-analysis-of-yeatss-he-wishes-for-the-cloths-of-heaven/> (accessed 17 July 2020)

Summary

Looking back at the time spent studying in EKA, I feel it was definitely a learning experience both in skill and as a person. I learned the basics of animating and was handed the tools to create an interesting story. I had emotional setbacks in my personal life which incapacitated me somewhat and lead me to prolong my studies to four years instead of two. During this time I learned to develop ideas into films by revisiting and constantly questioning my script and visuals. I learned to not shy away from time-consuming techniques. Undoubtedly my studies were plagued by the issues of time management which I hope I have improved upon. I am thankful for my mentors and fellow students. Because of them I grew more than I would have expected and felt great support. I learned animating but most of all I learned to persevere and bring an artistic vision to life.

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Appendix 1

Below are translations of poems cited in the text. If not otherwise stated, the author has translated the texts herself.

I

when I was twenty-five I thought
that I was a fool when I was twenty
when I was thirty I thought
that I was a fool at twenty-nine
now at thirty-three I think
that I was a fool yesterday
tomorrow I'll be a fool right away
the day after tomorrow I'll be a fool the next day

Jaan Pehk²⁸

²⁸ J. Pehk, 100% Jaan Pehk, p 38

II

My struggle is harsh and I come back
with eyes tired
at times from having seen
the unchanging earth,
but when your laughter enters
it rises to the sky seeking me
and it opens for me all
the doors of life.

Pablo Neruda translated by Donald D. Walsh.²⁹

²⁹ P. Neruda, *Captain's Verses*... pp 16–17

III

once

I will write a poem
that will make the reader's mind
jam up with a squeal
like a chainsaw
in a wet birch log
and it can't get loose
o-ye!

once

I will write a poem
that silently
rests on paper
so that the table beneath cracks
and then
falls to pieces
o-ye!

once

I will write a poem
that even reading the first verses
makes every bright-eyed lass
spring herself to my arms
and yearn to be mine
o-ye!

Wimberg³⁰

³⁰ Wimberg, Wabastatud Wärsid, p 59