

ISSN: 3030-2730

VILNIUS | REVIEW The Online Magazine
for Lithuanian Literature

Bimonthly Issue

07 | 08 – 2026

Lucy Kulwieć

Artūras Tereškinas

The Geography of Memory and the Polyphony of Diasporic Voices: From Trauma to Connection



LITHUANIAN
COUNCIL FOR
CULTURE

MRF
MEDIJŲ RĖMIMO FONDAS

Lucy Kulwieć

20 July 2026
Reflections on Belonging



Photo by Lana Djaka

We Have Been Waiting for You

I grew up with one mother and two grandparents. I grew up with a grandfather who told me the sea was the only border I could trust, who told me the people who stay behind die or hide and about the pyramid dunes he ran across as a child. They were Catholic. We were Catholic. I thought the smell of incense was the smell of God, but other than that, I didn't know what it meant.

It was when we tried to discover more about my grandpa and chisel into a past he did not wish to go there was tension. I always knew I was not to ask as a child – it was only when he wanted to tell. No one ever told me this; it went unspoken. I must have realized it before I could formulate the feeling into words. It had taken mum and grandma years to collect enough murmurings about Lithuania before he fled, to assemble some timeline of his past. The memories he chose to share were controlled and sparse.

I was born and raised in London, as was my mum. We were both only children. I don't like the term, differentiating those who don't grow up with a sibling as "only." It sounds akin to loneliness, and there is a difference between this and solitude. Mum was a working, single parent. My father and I are estranged. He came with his baggage, brooding and Welsh. I leave him plotted firmly across a border, buried beneath a fat mound of paper daffodils. He flecked my childhood with some visiting spells, but it became clear there was not much interest there. My grandpa gave me everything the man who made me couldn't. He gave me what I chased from a distant father. It wasn't going to be the same – it was sepia.

I was in the care of my grandparents for much of my childhood, spending evenings, weekends, and much of the school holidays with them until I was old enough to do otherwise.

I was grandpa's little friend, *his little ghost*, he would say, and I would spend hours on weekends looking through his scrapbooks filled with old cutouts of Lithuania's vast forests and sand dunes. The pictures were from old travel magazines he may have collected through the '60s and '70s. He had collated pages and pages of it, *Lithuania*, a place that always sounded mystical to my eager ear. The

echo of his words, *most is gone*, remained with me. The country is still there, but he held remembrance for the more transcendental, the people who lit candles under sacred oaks and the shtetls you wouldn't enter. He held in his memory an existence that has now disappeared. I started to know what pages my dead family would appear on in the albums and which people he claimed to not know the names of.



Grandfather

His mother, Alina, and her sister, Lucja, were teachers. There were two more sisters. Danuta, who

started as a teacher but became a secretary to the prime minister in Kaunas, then the capital of Lithuania, and Maria, who married well, *her husband was in steam*. Railways. The inception of connectivity. Grandpa couldn't wait to see where the tracks would lead. Somewhere greater than his small seaside town, timber huts and salty air. And yet there he was, making scrapbooks with images that enshrined the rural and folk dress of the region.

She was a teacher, my mother. Very good one. They can take away your home, your money, your clothes. They can never take away this, lightly stabbing the side of my head with his sturdy index finger. *Education*. He said this frequently, which he often accompanied with the belief that education in this country was verging on the inane for secondary school children. There was no weight given to culture, the arts, or philosophy. *Education here is silly*.

My grandparents pruned the past for me. I absorbed them both, willingly, lovingly. They tenderly coiled around me with their voices, creating a world with their memories that littered my dreams with black and white scenes. Grandma's childhood in Yorkshire was for bedtime, and grandpa's Lithuania was for every other time. Lith – u – a – ni – a. The five syllables weaved throughout my days in stubby Lon – don.

Grandpa said my great-grandmother would swim in lakes with water so clear you could count the pebbles below. They were special lakes, he said, where women would sing and wash themselves. I had swimming lessons every Saturday and would imagine I was spying pools of rocks at the bottom rather than the chipped tiles of an inner-city pool. I would ask grandpa on the drive home where he used to swim when he was young. *Rock pools*. Why did you leave? *War*.

I would prop myself at the top of the stairs after my bedtime to watch *The Bill*, a popular police drama, considered too mature for my eight-year-old self. The staircase led into the open plan living room, the TV just visible when I contorted my small body at its summit. Grandma would indulge me, ignoring the odd socks that crept at the top stair. Grandpa would say, *I think there is a little ghost tonight*. Either way, they let me stay until the end credits would start, when I would hurry back into the dark.

He would support my hockey matches dressed in a trilby hat, long black coat, and cravat, a mirage of Le Carre's George Smiley, standing away from the clusters of other parents on the sidelines. He stood with hands in pockets, eyes magnetized on wherever I would be, with or without the ball. He sat alone at my school plays while grandma would attend with her group of "girls": Susan, a Hungarian revolutionary who came over to England after the 1956 uprising, and Agnes, a warm, bird-like Polish lady who would walk and crochet – both wore berets. I was later told grandpa sat alone at the back in case he needed the loo.

During my university years, he read every book on my reading list, surprising himself on his enjoyment of Latin American literature. He would email me over his thoughts, glad he had read Jorge Luis Borges, finally. His short story "The South" stood out to him, and he sent me emails I have now lost analyzing the treatment of memory in the story, how the protagonist inherits a place in the south of Argentina he has never been to but acts as a conduit to his past; it offers memory a home.

He never went back to his "south," not even after the fall of communism and the three Baltic states became independent once more. *It's best the dead are not disturbed*, he told mum.

A small passport picture of his mother, Alina, was pinned to his writing desk where I would do homework after school. The desk now mine, she remains. She is older in the photograph than other pictures of her in the albums we looked at together. He would never have met her the age she was in this passport photo. He never went back. She must have sent it as an update. Look, this is what I am now. Her hair is off her face, maybe in a plait. She wears a black and white polka dot shirt. We have the same hairline, a widow's peak softening into the skull.

There was a photograph of four women on my childhood wall. I now know they were sisters, one of whom was Alina. I dreamt about these faces, in different windows of a timbered house behind translucent sheaths, their eyes blinking, heads puppeteered left then right.

We moved to the flat next door to my grandparents when I was seven, during which time the photograph disappeared. When I asked, mum said there never was a photograph, not that she had put up, at least. Maybe grandpa did, the go-between. It may have been wedged between books I never read and rocks I had collected from the English coast. I don't know where it went.

The school Alina taught at would have had two floors built from brick, two Grecian columns at the entrance. The students would have sat at wooden desks in rows of eight, the classrooms long and thin. The floors were made up of wooden slabs which creaked on entering – a welcoming and a warning to anyone inside who shouldn't be. The Palanga Progymnasium was built when Lithuania was under the Russian tsar's rule, but would continue in a new era of teaching beyond the Russian limits of before. Lithuania is an independent country now. It is 1924. They will teach in Lithuanian again, not Russian anymore. The church is near, a red brick structure which welcomes crowds on feast and name days year round. The surrounding area is treckled with compact wooden homes, painted muddy shades of yellow or red, others a rich, nutty brown, and beyond these, deep forests and farming ground to the east and the Baltic sea to the west. Some trees are never felled, protected by folklore, sacred oaks nestled within blackberry bushes and nettles, where locals place crucifixes, light candles, and bury written prayers into the creviced bark.

Grandpa was raised believing the forest that grew on the outer edges of his hometown held the spirits of those who had departed this world for the next, a select few trees needing to be tended to with the utmost care so as to act as portals to those who had left. Even now as a Catholic nation, the forests are still sacred to many throughout the Baltic states, Lithuania the last pagan state in Europe. For almost 1,000 years after Christianity became the core religion of the continent facilitated by the Roman Empire, Lithuanians continued to exercise ancient rituals and worship gods aligned to their natural surroundings.

Catholicism was eventually sewn into every aspect of their lives, as present in the Palanga community as the spit from the sea. Christmas and Easter were huge festivals, with strict fasting during Lent and Advent. Mum always observed how depressed grandpa became each Good Friday. When asked, *It was day of doing nothing.* You could not eat, read, or exercise. *All you could do was observe how Jesus gave his flesh for the life of others.* It had left its repressive mark on him. He would exist in silence, and he wouldn't eat. Often, he would sit in his armchair, watching shadows play across the wall.

Still, pagan beliefs lingered even within the most devout of Catholic homes, crucifixes decorated with wild flowers were propped against effigies on All Souls' Day, fires burned with doors left open to wash out malignant souls. The family's connection to Catholicism was passed down through the Polish paternal line, which settled in Lithuania due to the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth forged centuries ago. It was once the largest state in Europe – a federal union between the Kingdom of Poland and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, a substantial power through the 16th and 17th centuries. It held a diverse population of around 12 million. The story goes that the family tree held root as the black sheep of an aristocratic Polish dynasty that went astray. They came to Lithuania to breed their horses for Napoleon's army, but someone ran off with a stable hand, and so our offshoot of the tree was excommunicated as middle-class intelligentsia. Rumors I heard as a child of ancestors fighting in the Napoleonic Wars made grandpa's eyebrows raise with excitement as he repeated what he had heard as a boy to me.

Like most of eastern Europe, borders have been paved and then redrawn while the people and language remain – occupation is a loaded term. Even after the commonwealth disintegrated, the family were resolute in their Polishness, and grandpa grew up speaking it as his native tongue entwined with Lithuanian words. Alina and her sisters, grandpa too, were also fluent in Russian and German, able to shapeshift according to the political tides. I asked him to teach me Polish or Lithuanian when I was young. He said these were not useful languages and he would teach me another language he knew well, so I learnt French with a Baltic burr between my vowels.

It was a land of overlap, nations, and creeds depositing themselves into the strata of an ever-shifting core. Lithuania was a newly independent country when Alina gave birth to a son, a land trying to reaffirm its grounding after two centuries of rule by Russia's tsar once the commonwealth with Poland was no more. It was a land finding its way back to nationhood. The country also had one of the largest Jewish populations in Europe, 90% of which were murdered in the coming decades. Palanga was home to a healthy Jewish community with a school and synagogue. North of the river was referred to as "Jewish Town." Grandpa always remembered two Jewish girls in his class who would have been taught by Alina. *Both had long dark plaits either side of their face. They were pretty, we were friends. They sat together in row behind me. The when Germans came, as quick as next day even, they were gone.* This is not to say the community didn't know what was going on. There were Lithuanians who contributed to the rounding up and murders of the Jews under Nazi rule, burying the bodies in the once sacred woods. I went to Auschwitz in Poland at 17, and he couldn't bring himself to look at the only photograph I had taken of the infamous train track leading up to the entrance of Birkenau. He had asked to see it, but as soon as it was there, he whipped the micro Nikon out of my hand and

switched it off. *I cannot*, he said, handing the small, cheap camera back to me.

The forests of Lithuania were to be riddled further with death once the Nazis were expelled by Soviet Russia and the Lithuanian resistance known as the “forest brotherhood” were hunted through the trees, shot like game. *A German will tell you he will shoot, a Russian will just smile*, he always said.

He created a pristine Lithuania for me, his granddaughter, void of pain. Yet I knew his memories were wounds, from the shape of his eyes to the strain between his fingers and palm when speaking. The perceptiveness of a child can absorb multitudes. The real Lithuania he experienced was bound by his childhood, twisted with secrets and the debris of war. It was push and pull. He indulged in the spectacle of his heritage, the stories and sand, but he spent his whole life processing the acts of others that tore apart his trust – in people and nationhood. By the time I was born in the '90s, Lithuania was not a neutral zone for him, even in reference. It was embellished into folklore and myth, the truth obscured from view. Growing into adulthood I began to see why he would not return, the world he knew was destroyed, but the ghosts remained, waiting.

A ghost he never could name was his father; he was never told. Alina was unmarried and remained so all her life, so there was never any trail of who it could have been. We have only guessed the possibility of a travelling soldier or a school master his mother worked with. Alina gave birth to him in Kaunas, then returned to Palanga without him so as not to draw attention to herself or bring the family into disrepute. Her father was the town doctor and had a reputation to uphold but also knew what could be done to terminate a pregnancy. Whether it was faith or fate as the reason Alina kept the child, we do not know. It was never spoken of. He was not to ask. He was only told Alina was his mother when he was 15, on the eve of war. He was passed off as a cousin's child, parentless the majority of his childhood, joining Alina in Palanga at 9 months old. He left Lithuania at 18 and never returned.

When he is born, no one is to know this land brimming with cultural intricacies is soon to be culled. For now, there is hope. There is want for an established home. A school mistress will return, hungry for the routine and solitude she previously owned.

When Alina travelled back from Kaunas to Palanga, the ice must have been cruel.

She would have seen fields raised with several feet of snow. The setting sun casting shadows so the land resembled burial mounds stretching far into the horizon, the wind pushing glacial crystals that had settled on the surface to skate on. A deep indigo darkening above, blotched with a rosary of stars.

A carriage led by two horses, maybe three. They tire quicker with cold air in their lungs. A window webbed with ice. The gentleman in the seat opposite has a nose which comes so far out the remainder of his face is in shadow. His thin lips have coughed puffs of cold into the compartment since Klaipeda. A fur stole covers Alina's nose and mouth, cloistering warm breath, hiding the bitten lower lip, the skin beneath it red raw. Since the baby was born, her own teeth and nails have been pestering it, both working the patch of dry skin under her lower lip, kneading the sore. She bites the inside of her cheeks, dead white skin collecting into spindles within her mouth.

The road becomes smoother as they approach the sea town, her eyes searching for the forest she knows. She squeezes her eyes, trying to find it, the male passenger opposite wondering what she has lost. She wants to see the trees surrounding her black lake, the clear glass she would break with long, striding limbs.

She only manages to find the horizon separating the sky from the earth, gradually interrupted with the silhouettes of houses she will know.

The procedure at hand, as her papa would say to his patients, is a straight one, which we shall navigate together.

She is returning to keep it straight, linear, clear.

Once the carriage door opens, the wind punches deep into her lungs. Other than the coachman's lantern, darkness, her vision blurred by gale and cold. His cape wraps his body like a bat wing, his long arm beckoning her out of the coach door, onto the step.

Alina is home.

However sturdy she remembered the broad timber and yellow panels of the house, tonight it will appear delicate, cut from paper, light as the powdered snow. A burning glow is pulsing through the lace curtains, figures shadowing themselves.

The door will open.

She will see Lucja, her sister, and immediately think of her newborn, how he looked at her with eyes as blue as the periwinkle ribbon she tied onto the railing of his cot that morning. Tiny fingertips capable of nothing but innocence, twitching towards her hand hovering above his. A distant shape blurs from the center, spooling out into a dark, oily liquid. His eyes become the color of coal.

Her papa will smell of tobacco and the starch on his woolen suit. He will look at the space next to where her bags are dropped, as if one of the two cases should be something else. He seeks more than tired greetings, an explanation for the lack of a baby by her side perhaps, although he already knows she will have left it with the midwife in Kaunas. Her sister will save her, whisking her though to the kitchen for goulash prepared by Bogna the housekeeper, who now carries her two leather cases upstairs to her room. Alina will cup the steaming bowl like a sacred orb, weighted by its heat as she hurls it down her throat, coughing through the paprika as a sage leaf catches on her tongue.

Alina and Lucja will sit together in the kitchen at the back of the house. The snow a freshly laid quilt, the silence giving life to the fire, a broth held on an iron hook above. Lucja fiddles with Alina's ring, their mother's ring, a gold setting with an oval amber jewel. Alina watches the two hounds by the hearth, heads on their front paws, black eyes restless as the floor above creaks.

"I thought it was a shadow, but your lip, Lina," Lucja says, pointing softly with an upward curve to her index finger, approaching to stroke the wound. Alina tells her it is a burn, nothing more, from their elder sister Danuta's curling rod, with whom she stayed in Kaunas with these past six months.

"Danuta curls her hair now?" Lucja's glare thaws into a smile.

"Shh, she wants those curls to seem inherited," Alina whispers before forcing her changed body out of the chair. "I need to sleep, my love."

On her first day back at work, Alina may be presented with some dried flowers by the young student Gosha. The girl will tell her that there were fern leaves in the poesy to keep it as green as possible, but they wouldn't keep through to winter. She hands them over to her with a compact courtesy, Alina spying traces of dried mud on her fingers and forearms. Gosha will be one of the few church students, fees fully funded by the Catholic parish. She has problems with her blood – Alina's father, the town doctor, has been to treat her more than once. The smell, he says, and they sleep on straw.

"We missed you, Miss Kulwiec."

"We can refill it together with the flowers next spring." And she places them on the windowsill as the polar white of the snow outside silhouettes the skeletal thing. She takes a moment to look at it, propping the gift against the corner so it stands with grace. Then she will turn and strike a slash of chalk beneath the date, riled by whispers from the back of her classroom.

"Did you all read Flaubert's 'A Simple Heart' or will I have to read it out for you?" Disembarking from her perch from the front and striding towards the back of the room, eyes fixed on the crucifix above the old door. Alina will know how rumors brew in this town – always mouths to lick up the crumbs. Townsfolk of a small community are the worst for those craving anonymity. Eyes collecting as ears pry. She knows the older children will have listened to their parents, who will suspect her absence over the warmer months as something more than tending to a sick cousin. By summer, the one before will disappear, and the one after that. She hopes time will deaden her vanishing act.

Now, she counts the fresh moth holes bitten into the rug which hangs at the back of the classroom to keep the warmth close. She and her sister Lucja, also a teacher at the school, darn the holes each summer when taken down, a red the color of afterbirth pockmarked with peony pink wool. She wants the cold to thaw and thinks of sand in her boots, in her hands, the few granules she has to pick out beneath her nails.

The sand I played in when I was young became tiny castles cemented for those who lived beneath the sea, so at night they had somewhere to hide if a storm came in. The wet sand washed onto the English coastline was met by my cyan blue bucket to make these structures, designs conducted by grandpa. As we'd pat the damp cement together, he would lament about the sand dunes of Lithuania. *For miles, mountains on the coast.* He told me the Lithuanian myth of Jūratė and Kastytis often, so we'd be assembling a hideout for her, the goddess of the Baltic Sea, if she ever came this far west.

The tale varies, but the one I heard begins with Jūratė, who lived under the sea in a beautiful amber

castle off the coast of Lithuania. A young fisherman named Kastytis was fishing in the shallows. She saw him and fell in love, asking him to join her in the amber castle. They were happy here until Perkūnas, the thunder god, found out she had fallen for a mortal man. He was furious and struck the amber castle with a lightning bolt; it exploded into a million pieces across the Baltic Sea. In some versions Jūratė rescues Kastytis from drowning, but in the tale Grandpa told, he was killed by Perkūnas. Jūratė's teardrops are the amber pieces washed ashore, and you can still hear her sad voice mourning her love in a storm.

Amber is a fossilized tree resin mostly used for jewelry or natural medicine. It is clear and veined, a warm tint between yellow and orange. The amber Lithuania is famous for is torn up from the seafloor by waves and collected by hand. It was produced millions of years ago when the sea was originally a spread of pine forestry, the resin from the pine trees' sap. After an ice age that created the Baltic sea, the forests were buried beneath. Now the amber floats back up to the surface, sometimes containing fossilized insects and extinct plant materials.

Grandpa's hometown, Palanga, still honors the legend, the crown on its coat of arms representing the goddess Jūratė, the amber beads below a nod to the Klaipeda region's ancient business of amber processing. There is a monument to both Jūratė and Kastytis in the town. He would recite their legend to me most days on our Devon beach holiday, a story told to him throughout his childhood. I shared with him how I wished I had inherited the piercing blue eyes of him, mum, and grandma. I didn't even inherit the deep brown of my father's. They are a light hazel with flecks of yellow and green, an in-between. *Our eyes are the blue of the sea, yours are the amber*, grandpa said to me. He always told me how lucky I was, *to live like a child*. He was haunted by his mother, his aunts, and their secrets, his tales of which haunted me.

See them now: four daughters raised in an out of season seaside town. The wind slashes their skin with sea spit and sand which gets caught in the muscle of the airstream. There is the silence of faith and fluctuating borders, their mother bedbound for years, passing away when the grandchildren start to spring up. They rent rooms in their home during high season to holiday makers, and so they climb into the attic and lay their mattresses down in thin pools of light which strike between the two circular roof windows. At night the stars align in their eternal configurations, the sisters deliberating if it is Orion or Pegasus that floats above. The housemaid Bogna sleeps in the attic room parallel and bangs on the wall when they get too loud.

The breaking waves slow their path along the beach, their bodies wrapped in finely woven cotton shawls with long dark skirts, silhouettes undulating between the shapes of the dunes. All were taught to swim when they were young. They chase each other down to "the crush," where the sea slips up to meet the land. The girls walk on a quiet stretch of the beach before it arches down towards the Curonian Spit, a thin spindle of land that breaks away from the shore for several miles. They cup the water between their hands, throwing pools into the sky to run beneath their conjured rain.

The sea is the only border you can trust, my grandpa tells me, removing my armbands before I am ready.

Artūras Tereškinas

10 August 2026
Poetry



Photo from the author's archive

Arcadia

Your body is like a brownish sheet of paper
may I crumple it?
may my fingers write on it?
I snuggle up to a sheet of paper
kissing you, though I desire to hate

I'd like your body to be a hotel
I could spend a week there
a five-star hotel in the city center
with windows looking out onto three Eiffel towers
I can't take my eyes off them

All the roads lead to you
like my bleeding arteries
like the ageing veins in my legs
I caress you, pressing you tight to my chest
unable to hold back tears

May I crumple you? write on you?
journey to you every day? stay inside you?
you're silent for a long time, eyes closed,
then you say: *Hey, you, baby, let's go*

My apartment on Šopeno Street is cold
the ceiling is tall the windows are plastic

cuddled up to your lips
the electric heaters growl with grief
for it is cold still

When you kiss me
I try to imagine what love is
is it like a burning radiator
metallic passion
though our hands are still cold

After the third glass of heavy red wine
we're a little warmer
we lie naked on the old sofa bed
dark blue sheets
your body hair keeps me warm

You like to be rough
gently slapping my buttocks
your hands are rough
from working in your parents' garden
they scratch me like the branches of a naked maple tree
outside the window

When we heat up like an electric radiator
we shout obscenities
me in English you in Lithuanian
I still don't know if this is love
or rather extraordinary sex
which I still miss like that Helsinki summer

I wanted to call myself a neon summer
that was to be the title of my novel
never-ending neon summer
I enjoy drinking yellow neon
I know it's poison
but life is poison
I'm poisoned daily, as soon as I wake
getting up, with difficulty
hobbling to the bathroom

hobble hobble
I'll brush my teeth with neon toothpaste
trying to recall
what I dreamed
only me, talking to myself
only you on the computer screen
your smile, your nails
painted neon red

have you injected neon into your veins?
have you taken neon vitamins
is your life brighter
after a neon coffee?

I don't wait for answers
they're like exhaustion first thing in the morning
like poison
getting poisoned first thing in the morning
trying to recall
your breathing

we get poisoned naked
soaking in neon
and the repetitive question

Fuck it do you love me
Fuck it do you love me
Fuck it do you love me

a day might end like
it has never ended
once twice three times
multiple endings
hard to guess

we lay in bed
looking at each other
I don't know what you're thinking
what you're planning for tomorrow
it's good that you're not crying

the air swells with moisture
and I don't have *air conditioning*
I don't even have a fan
I brush the sweat from my forehead
I close my eyes because I know
I will not see you again

it's one of the possible endings
kind of funny
as if I were standing at a traffic light
unable to decide
whether to move forward
or stand still and watch
as the traffic light turns into you
your red eyes light up
and I'm still standing here

I always remember the black plastic bags
the men cling to them as they walk the alley of love in Vingis Park
glancing sideways as I bike past
the "Gucci" bags laugh at me and at them

the alley of love in Vingis Park is like a worn-out plastic bag
expensive but mostly empty, a few condoms
a bottle of cheap brandy, water, toilet paper

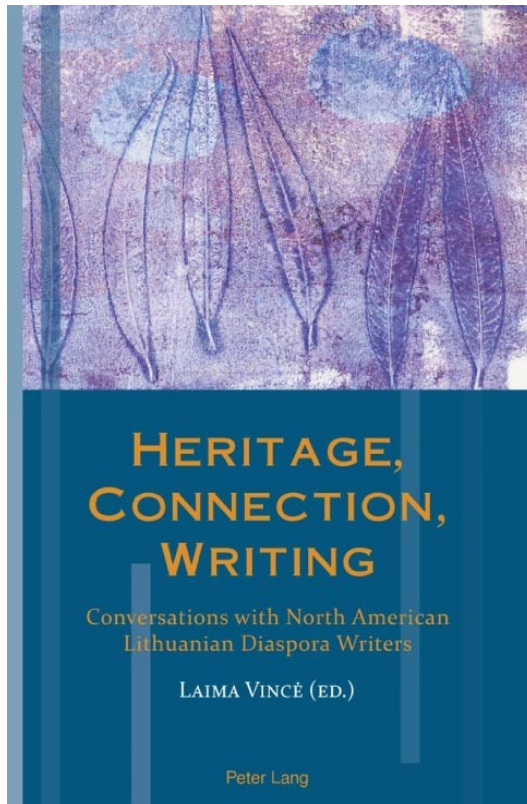
when I bike in Vingis Park
the men in cheap suits pursue me
with their eyes, their lips part
as if to say stop, get off your bike
we're starved for love, would you like a sip of brandy

I try to avoid meeting their eyes
I make a few circles, and return to the alley of love
two men with worn-out faces wave to me
smiling, one of them is missing a few teeth
the other one's smoking with his legs elegantly crossed

when I bike to Vingis Park
I can still see the black plastic bags
flapping in the wind without the men in worn-out suits
and cheap faces, their ties are neatly folded
in the bags, waiting to return to their tired wives

The Geography of Memory and the Polyphony of Diasporic Voices: From Trauma to Connection

14 August 2026
Reviews



LAIMA
VINCĖ (ED.)

*Heritage, Connection,
Writing*

One of the most notable shifts in Lithuanian diaspora research over the past decade has been the move from institutions and historical events toward individual experience, memory, and life narratives (oral history). This direction has gained particular momentum with the development of studies in transnationalism, life writing, cultural memory, and postmemory.

Laima Vincė is a well-known scholar and writer. The idea for her book *Heritage, Connection, Writing: Conversations with North American Lithuanian Diaspora Writers* first emerged as a postdoctoral project during her studies at Vytautas Magnus University. It is worth noting that her previous book, *Vanished Lands: Memory and Postmemory in North American Lithuanian Diaspora Literature*, published by Peter Lang International Publishers, focuses on themes of collective trauma and memory and is based on her doctoral dissertation. In that work, Vincė examines the expression of memory and postmemory in Lithuanian diaspora literature – specifically in the writings of authors of Lithuanian descent who write in English and whose work engages with Lithuania and its historical traumas. Vincė analyzes how the interconnections between Lithuanian and Jewish historical experiences are reflected in the literature and memoirs of different diaspora generations, with particular attention to Lithuania's historical trauma.

Heritage, Connection, Writing: Conversations with North American Lithuanian Diaspora Writers is intended both for scholars and diaspora researchers as well as for a broader readership. The book invites readers to view heritage as a form of connection, creativity, and a possibility for a shared cultural future. Vincė's book fits organically into the academic field of Lithuanian diaspora history while also offering a distinctive research model – instead of a traditional literary history or theoretical monograph, Vincė chooses the form of dialogue.

This book brings together the voices of twenty-seven North American writers of Lithuanian and Litvak descent. These are interviews with descendants of the first wave of emigration, children and grandchildren of wartime refugees (the postwar displaced persons [DP] generation), and American writers of Litvak heritage whose work engages with Lithuania. The book presents conversations alongside excerpts from literary works that reflect the experiences of people born outside Lithuania or those who left the country in childhood.

But these are not conventional interviews – they form a book of conversations (here it is important to distinguish between an interview and a conversation, a dialogue, in which the most important element is the act of talking itself). They form a kind of dialogue “between descendants and ancestors.” The work of North American authors of Lithuanian descent constitutes a highly significant part of Lithuanian literature, yet so far it hasn’t been fully researched. Writing in English, these authors engage in their own way of “writing the nation,” developing a dialogue between the historical traditions inherited from their parents and ancestors and the contemporary multicultural environment. Reflecting on this complex relationship is no simple task, yet Vincė consistently realizes her vision and conveys the central idea of her study.

The conversations are with writers from the North American Lithuanian diaspora living in such places as Alaska, California, Chicago, Colorado, Maine, New York, Scotland, and Vilnius. The book explores what it means to cultivate Lithuanian and Litvak heritage while living in North America and writing in English. Through conversations with twenty-seven authors and poets, the experiences of three generations and three waves of migration, cultural memory, and the search for diasporic identity come into view. In this way, dialogue becomes not merely illustrative material but both the object of study and a methodological principle. Vincė’s developed concept allows the volume to be read on several levels. On the one hand, it is a work of literary scholarship. On the other hand, it is a document of diaspora sociology, cultural anthropology, and autobiographical memory. Compared to Laima Vincė’s abovementioned monograph, this new book marks a conceptual shift, with its central focus on connection rather than trauma and postmemory.

Reading the conversations in the book, we begin to discern the underlying assumption that literary identity is revealed both in literary works themselves as well as in reflections on the creative process. In other words, an author’s self-understanding as expressed in conversation becomes no less important than the text they have written. This approach is closely aligned with contemporary life writing studies, in which autobiographical narrative is regarded as a form of cultural self-understanding rather than merely a biographical fact. In the introduction, Vincė emphasizes that life writing encompasses autobiography and diaries as well as poetry, the novel, interviews, and other modes of self-representation.

Vincė introduces key theoretical concepts, namely Marianne Hirsch’s concept of postmemory, her collaborative work with Nancy K. Miller, *Rites of Return*, the concept of collective trauma, and transnationalism: “Marianne Hirsch argues that in postmemory the memories of the trauma survivor supersede the narrative of the child’s life as they are growing up. She writes about how she could remember the streets that her parents used to escape the Nazis back in Romania, but she could not remember the details of her own childhood” (p. 533). However, the book is not burdened by theoretical discussions and instead gives priority to the interviewees’ voices. It can be argued that the author consciously relinquishes the researcher’s dominant voice and adopts a moderator’s position.

The book stands out for its structural logic. The conversations are divided into three sections according to migration history: descendants of the first migration waves, the postwar DP generation and their children, and authors of Litvak descent. This structure allows readers to see the cultural development of the diaspora as a whole rather than isolated lives. At the same time, it demonstrates that diasporic identity is not static. It is continually reconstructed by each generation. This editorial decision is also significant from a methodological perspective. Histories of Lithuanian diaspora literature have most often been organized chronologically or focused on textual analysis. Vincė chooses a third path: a sociocultural cross-section of generations. It makes it possible to observe how the relationship with Lithuania changes among authors born and working abroad. For descendants of the first migration wave, Lithuania is most often rediscovered through genealogy, heritage, and symbols. For the DP generation, Lithuania becomes the memory of a lost homeland. As for younger authors, it functions as part of a transnational identity in which a physical life between two countries has become the norm. Vincė develops this idea consistently in the foreword and introduction, emphasizing that, for many of the writers, journeys to Lithuania after the restoration of independence became a kind of “rite of return,” enabling them to rethink their relationship with family history, language, and culture. It is important to note that, in her conversations with the participants, Vincė does not seek to overshadow their interpretations. Instead, she deliberately refrains from claiming the “final word.”

The conversations address the history of different generations of the Lithuanian diaspora, their relationship with Lithuania, and their experiences of emigration and adaptation to a new cultural environment as well as political, historical, psychological, and moral issues. All of the interviewed authors raise important questions: what kind of identity emerges in the work of authors who do not write in Lithuanian? What image of the nation is formed by their texts? Scholars of diaspora literature

and its sociological dimensions (Dalia Kuizinienė, Žydrone Kolevinskienė, Violeta Davoliūtė, and others) have emphasized that contemporary literature produced beyond Lithuania's borders is gradually moving away from the long-dominant narrative of suffering and guilt, while at the same time retaining the central questions of national self-awareness: who am I, and who do I want to become? In texts written in English, the experiences of multiple cultures naturally merge. A writer who lives and creates outside the boundaries of their linguistic homeland allows into their work the voices, intonations, idioms, and translations of another culture, thereby enriching both language and culture while becoming more receptive to the Other. The texts collected in the book testify to the strong desire of contemporary individuals to preserve a connection to their roots in a globalized world, to understand their identity, and to continually turn back toward Lithuania – their own, their parents, or their ancestors' homeland. All of the interviewed writers reflect on Lithuania in one way or another in their literary work. In this way, diaspora today is defined not through linguistic affiliation but through cultural connection. This represents an important paradigmatic shift, for Lithuanian identity is no longer understood here as a closed national category. Rather, it becomes a transnational cultural phenomenon in which genealogy, family history, cultural memory, language, creative work, and a voluntarily chosen relationship with Lithuania are all equally important. In these conversations, Lithuania appears as a space of imagination – at times, it is Grandmother's stories, songs from childhood, family photographs, archives, or a first journey after 1990.

The first section of the book is devoted to the descendants of the first waves of emigration (economic emigrants called *grynoriai*¹ and DPs). The authors interviewed here generally no longer speak Lithuanian, yet they still consider themselves, in one way or another, connected to Lithuania. Cultural heritage, therefore, is not necessarily transmitted through language. It may be passed down through family stories, place names, surnames, religious customs, gastronomy, or even imagination. This idea is particularly important in contemporary diaspora studies. For a long time, Lithuanian émigré studies were dominated by a rather normative view, that proficiency in Lithuanian and participation in community life were the principal measures of Lithuanianness. Vincė's interviewees significantly broaden this model. They demonstrate that a cultural connection can persist even when the language of a person's parents or grandparents has already been lost.

The most striking example is Lidia Yuknavitch (b. 1963, USA; Vincė's interview with her was published in *Vilnius Review* on November 16, 2023). In this book, the conversation with Yuknavitch can be read as a kind of manifesto of heritage as creative intuition. In her work, Lithuania appears not as a collection of historical facts but as a symbolic landscape in which beauty exists alongside historical violence. This dual perspective helps avoid a romanticized understanding of origins while preserving an emotional connection to the land of a person's ancestors.

Jocelyn Bartkevičius's (b. 1956, USA) narrative also plays a similar role. There, her grandmother's garden becomes a miniature Lithuania in Connecticut. At first glance, such details may seem merely domestic, yet they perform an important role of cultural memory because they materialize heritage in everyday life:

My grandmother lived in a part of Lithuania where during World War I the Russians and the Prussians were fighting. She had to hide in the woods, and she told me stories about that. So, here I was, I'd get disoriented in the woods and lose my bearings, and I didn't know what berries I could eat and meanwhile the irony was that my grandmother had survived in the forest. You could throw her anywhere, and she would know how to survive off the land. So, I wrote a piece called "Out of the Garden" because I had this sense that my grandmother had lived in this Eden, as horrifying and war-torn as it was. She lived in the natural world in a way that I couldn't. That seemed tragic to me. I was two generations away from her, but I had lost that ability. (p. 25).

In this first section of the book, what might be called a "post-ethnic identity" emerges particularly clearly. The authors do not attempt to prove their Lithuanianness. Rather, they speak of it as one among many layers of their identity.

If the first section speaks about heritage without direct memory, the second part of the book presents narratives by writers whose lives are directly connected to the experiences of the Second World War and the Soviet occupation or to the transmission of those experiences to their children. It is here that Vincė's ability to incorporate elements of her own individual biography becomes clear. Rasa Gustaitis, Birutė Putrius, Jonas Zdanys, Antanas Šileika, Irene Guilford, Daiva Markelis, Julija Šukys, Nida Dauknys, Audrė Budrys, Milda de Voe, Rimas Užgiris, Maria Williams, Gint Aras, Daiva Chesonis, and Svaja Vansauskas tell very different life stories, yet their words are united by one central question: what does it mean to inherit a history that you did not experience yourself?

In contemporary memory studies, the so-called "competitive victimhood" model, in which different

historical traumas are set against one another, is being criticized more often. Vincė's book of conversations offers a different path – a polyphonic form of memory. One of the book's most intriguing themes is language. The authors repeatedly speak about translation, mediation, and storytelling for another audience. Even those who do not speak Lithuanian feel a responsibility to tell stories that might otherwise remain unheard. Language thus becomes a form of moral responsibility.

One of the book's greatest strengths is that it does not attempt to construct a single, unified narrative of the Lithuanian diaspora. On the contrary, it consistently highlights diverse experiences, which at times even contradict one another. For this reason, the book can be read as a polyphonic narrative in which what matters is not a definitive answer to the question "What is the Lithuanian diaspora?" but rather the interaction of the different voices of writers who live and create within the diaspora. The authors speak not only about Lithuania. They speak about America, Canada, family history, language loss, journeys of their return, the Holocaust, the Soviet occupation, literature, ecology, childhood, and the creative process. As a result, Lithuania is not merely a geographical place here. Instead, it becomes a symbolic point around which very different identities are constructed.

In this respect, the book aligns closely with contemporary memory studies, which understand collective memory not as a unified narrative but as a continually evolving cultural space. Jan Assmann, Aleida Assmann, and Michael Rothberg have repeatedly emphasized that cultural memory exists only through dialogue among different experiences. Vincė's book of conversations puts this principle into practice.

The conversations in this book reveal how North American poets and writers understand and live with a heritage that has become inseparable from their identity. For authors born in North America, their connection to Lithuania, though often symbolic, remains an important part of their values and sense of self in an increasingly fragmented world. It can be argued that these authors open Lithuania to the world and the world to Lithuania.

The third section examines Litvak emigration to the United States. It includes a conversation with the internationally renowned artist Samuel Bak as well as with the youngest participant in the volume, the poet and lecturer Malachi Black. This is one of the book's most compelling sections, as it juxtaposes Lithuanian and Litvak experiences and narratives while raising the question of whether the Litvak relationship with Lithuania can be analyzed through the same categories that are applied to the Lithuanian diaspora.

Ellen Cassedy: *I don't see myself primarily as Litvak American or Jewish American. I went to talk by Samuel Bak and his first words were, "Ich bin Vilner," which means, "I am from Vilna." That's just not true for me. This identity is one that I discovered. I am truly a representative of the third generation. I'm really pleased with the overlap in subject matter of myself and Lithuanian American writers who are exploring that period, but I don't put myself into that category really. I don't put myself in the category of Jewish American writer either. I've gone through life with the name Ellen Cassedy, an Irish name, which is from my father's side of the family, and you know that's a particular experience rather than my being half Jewish and out there for everyone to see. It is a different experience than if my name were Ellen Levine, my mother's name.* (p. 515)

Vincė allows the stories themselves to speak. The work of Samuel Bak, Ellen Cassedy, and Rita Gabis introduce a completely different perspective on the memory of Lithuania from that found among the authors of the DP generation. They serve as a reminder that the history of twentieth-century Lithuania cannot be understood solely through the narrative of the Soviet occupation.

Laima Vincė herself states that she initially planned to write about the most prominent writers of Lithuanian descent in Canada and the United States (Antanas Šileika, Irene Guilford, and others), but another idea emerged. Many of the authors she interviewed shared that, within their families, the Holocaust was discussed only in a low voice. Among their relatives, there had been both rescuers of Jews as well as individuals who had collaborated with the Nazis. For this reason, the book's third section is especially important. The volume primarily reflects the voices of authors who have consciously chosen to maintain a cultural connection with Lithuania. As a result, a positive relationship with their heritage naturally predominates. It is perhaps only natural that critical voices are far less audible – voices of those who speak of complete assimilation, the rejection of Lithuanian identity, or a conflicted relationship with their family history.

The twenty-seven conversations form what might be called a literary and cultural archive of the twenty-first-century North American Lithuanian diaspora. The significance of this "archive" will only grow over time. Importantly, the book has been published in the prestigious Peter Lang series *Exile Studies*. This enables Lithuanian diaspora literature to enter into a broader context of European and

North American scholarship on exile, migration, and cultural memory. The book demonstrates that the Lithuanian diaspora of the twenty-first century is shaped by several waves of migration, different languages, diverse historical experiences, and multifaceted relationships with Lithuania. It represents a significant attempt to redefine what it means to belong to Lithuania in the twenty-first century, even when one lives on another continent and writes in another language.